MACHINE'S LAST TESTAMENT

BENJANUN SRIDUANGKAEW

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Annotation

To give humanity peace, the artificial intelligence Samsara will wage an eternal war… In a universe torn by combat, Samsara's world is the final haven that refugees will pay any price to enter. At the Selection Bureau, Suzhen Tang upholds the AI's will and grants citizenship to those deemed worthy. When she meets new arrival Ovuha, she judges Ovuha a model candidate—educated, beautiful, a perfect fit for utopia. But Ovuha carries with her the seeds of battle, and what she brings may spell apocalyptic change: the breaking of Samsara, the end of paradise.

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SAMSARA

Chapter One

Evening, verging on nightfall. In the sterile cleanness of Suzhen's office there is the smell of war, familiar and earthy: soot and sweat, dried gore, sickness. Candidates are sent as is—a phrase that's always struck her as faintly mercantile, not for people at all—to give them no time to prepare, and therefore no time to dissemble. She gazes across her desk at a man from one of the asteroid colonies, bent and parched, looking a decade older than he is. Frail from starvation, scarred from combat or abuse: no telling which. In the halfway houses and centers that accommodate refugees there is little order, and the wardens who run them aren't known for gentleness. There are beatings, sometimes more. It is against regulation but it is nevertheless an open secret; everyone knows what goes on. There is nearly no point curbing or protesting it. Beyond her purview in any case.

She continues to study the man, his blanched skin, the dark circles under his eyes. The nose that broke and did not heal well, the colorless clothes given to all arrivals that hang on him loose and shapeless. Once she thought, entering this field, that she would be crippled by sympathy. That to all who enter she would say yes, yes, yes, you too deserve Samsara's grace, we have so much, welcome to Anatta. But the process dehumanizes. Each person becomes a dossier, a collection of risk factors and potential to contribute, to be weighed against one another and then weighed against Bureau guidelines. And always at the back of her mind there is the quota. An agent can accept just so many in a month; any excess she would have to personally sponsor, become responsible for. Excess, even that is a measure which reduces personhood to quantity.

To be a citizen is to deserve.

Suzhen's quota for the month is nearly over.

Even after two years in this post, she still doesn't know how to deliver judgment. She's tried the slow approach, gently, but that merely leads to her candidate trying to bargain—as though *no* is a commodity that can be haggled over, bribed into a *yes*. They'd tell her of their families and their tragedies, false or real, though there's never a shortage of real ones. None ever admits to what camp wardens do to them and it is easy, she thinks, to take that as a sign nothing untoward happens in the camps. The bruises, the wounds, those could simply be a product of brawls between inmates. Inmates. She has tried to find other words but this one sticks, the official terminology. It used to be that she called them her clients, but that was absurd. She does not serve their interests. She is their enemy.

"I'm sorry," Suzhen says, after one more nominal look at the

man's profile. Even for a colony, his home was unusually poverty-stricken before it was depopulated and annexed by a warlord. He is not particularly educated, has little to offer Anatta, has a history of misdemeanors while in detainment. Noncompliance, attempted theft of food, physically unfit for factory labor either on-planet or on Vaisravana. "I'll have to put you on a waitlist. You can try again next month."

Sometimes they react in fury and attack her, and they'd be taken away—truly away, cast out of Anatta. Sometimes their eyes would glitter with the hope she's raised with the words *next month*. A few take it stoically. This man bursts into tears, there's no transition between his silence and the howling that erupts; he is on the floor, hand over mouth as though he too is trying to stop the sound, but it comes through loud, uncontrollable and inconsolable. A single continuous scream, it is astonishing what the human throat is capable of, all that raw noise. It vibrates through her bones, impossibly seismic, until her temples ache. He is taken away by the pair of drones that guard her room. She doesn't like human security. Drones use no more force than necessary.

What is it about desperation that takes away all dignity, what is it about that lack of dignity that lowers a person in her regard. What is wrong with her, she could ask of herself. Suzhen turns off the channel that links her datasphere to her work terminal. In her ear her guidance says, "Citizen, your stress indicators are elevated. You've been granted two hours off and may leave early."

Very nearly she laughs. She supposes it will soon ask if she wishes to schedule a counseling session. Most selection agents have to. They receive counseling and behavioral calibration more frequently than most civil servants. For the average administrative personnel their subjects are abstract, collated into numbers, statistics. For Suzhen they are immediate, physical, hopelessly *here*.

Suzhen strides past the doors to her coworkers' offices, then past the lobby where candidates wait their turns. The same smell here. Not entirely filthy, they're screened for contagion and allowed a minimum of hygienic care, but it is not the filth that thickens in her throat like smoke. Rather it is desperation, the reek of broken things. She meets no one's gaze. The slightest eye contact is signal: they will crowd around her, pleading, offering, grasping at her before the guards restrain them. Hungry ghosts.

On the balcony she looks down at the expanse of city, this part one of the neatest, despite the contents of the lobby she's just left behind. Her guidance murmurs to her, suggesting destress routines, opening a submersion channel that promises deep, dreamless sleep tonight. Instead she takes out her cigarette case. Half a dozen

cylinders, each prettily faceted, jewel-toned. Emerald, ruby, sapphire. She lights a green one, waits for the substances within it to cook, and takes a long inhalation. The smoke rises, inlaid with phantasmagoria, snakes and rushing jade currents. Cosmetic—it interacts with her visual implants—rather than hallucinogenic, since her guidance no longer allows her to indulge in anything stronger. Even what is in the cigarette is harmless, just sufficient to ease her nerves, lowering adrenaline and cortisol. Her jaw relaxes. She didn't realize how hard she was grinding her teeth. By habit she hates wasting anything, a bad habit inherited from her mother and leaner times, so she extinguishes the cigarette and puts it back in its case, the butt blackened and smeared from her mouth. She tracks the trajectory of a taxi across the air, its lean segmented body gleaming in the autumn light. It is a perfect evening, crisp and filigreed, the building in which she stands and the building across a marvel of Mobius arches, honeycombed windows, curlicue balconies and inverted hanging gardens. On Anatta everything, every moment, is full of grace.

"I'm taking a walk," she says. "Find me someplace with minimal foot traffic."

"You ought to be home by nine, citizen," the guidance chides, but it obliges with a list of the nearest places where she can stretch her legs. It doesn't always. For every action it weighs the variables of her well-being, even an act as innocent as taking a walk. There was a time when it forbade her from going near any sort of bridge, high roof, or exposed balcony. There was a time when all sharp things were removed from her vicinity. Samsara's wisdom protects every citizen, especially from themselves.

Huajing Station is quiet this time of the day, alabaster floor thinly peopled, pristine vending machines in hibernation. Refugees from the halfway houses are flown in on secure vehicles, so that citizens never have to catch sight of them on public transport. Her gaze passes over the sparse crowd and her filters notify her—citizen class prime, citizen class theta, probationary resident, citizen class prime… She looks away; it isn't a setting she can toggle off, even outside the office. Agents from the Selection Bureau don't enforce, but they are duty-bound to report anything amiss, the ones who do not belong, a noncitizen where they shouldn't be. The nearest Interior Defense officer would then take over.

Her carriage is all but empty, sparing her the requirement of desultory interaction. She has been marked for asocial tendencies; her guidance has warned her of the fact more than once. Ahead of her a family has seated themselves, two spouses and one wife talking of parental application in hushed excitement. Next to them are three students, interning at a tax branch, in blue-and-white academic

uniforms. They mutter about their aptitudes. At their age they will be receiving their third evaluation: the first early in life, to measure character and inclination. The second to judge academic and vocational training. The third to assign employment. Suzhen imagines what it is like to receive all three, to have that certainty of path from birth, lives laid out in a flawless map. To be called citizen from the start.

"You've reached your destination, citizen." Suzhen starts, at first thinking her guidance means quite something else. But the train has simply stopped.

Stepping out of the station there is a brief moment where she's met with bracing cold, before her clothes adapt and thermoregulate. She has configured them so she'd feel the elements, another old habit. There are no settings that would let her feel discomfort, even then. She heads up the winding, blue stairs. Each step is gently lit, and the metallic glass has more suction than it looks. Even a drunk tourist wouldn't lose their footing. She emerges. Salt in the air. The night gleams wetly, the grid-lights limpid on the pavement.

She walks down the waterfront onto a bridge of steel cartilage and porphyry, the railings black and high as walls. Underneath, ferries speed by like jeweled sharks, loaded with commuters and travelers from Yudhishthira or Khrut. Going too fast for Suzhen's filters to identify. She breathes more easily as she leans against the bridge, forehead against frigid glass. Perhaps she needs more than a few hours off. Her guidance would readily request a vacation on her behalf: it pesters her to take just that, every other week. A hobby, she needs one of those. A functioning social life. The stratum on the hierarchy of needs that, however omniscient, Samsara cannot entirely provide when the citizen is not willing.

On a nearby billboard, a Peace Guard feed plays. Dispatch from the frontline, lately more frequent. Footage of combat in thermosphere on one of the barren worlds that exist beyond Samsara's governance, the domain of warlords. A Peace Guard hornet is engaging a locust formation, its aegis flaring as it dissipates enemy fire, its bulkhead platinum against the planet's clogged atmosphere and wasteland clouds. The locust formation is quickly broken and dismembered. Their components—armored hull, pilot cradles—plunge through the atmosphere, cinderous as they fall.

This is might.

Next is a scene in a town blackened by artillery, the buildings in ruin, shattered roofs and walls lying in pieces on the russet sand. The skeletons of houses stand bared and ruddy as raw skin. Their tattered inhabitants have been herded out, lined up in the open. They are tearing up images of their masked warlord—the Comet, Suzhen

recognizes from the design—and scattering the pieces to the dust-choked wind. Peace Guard soldiers watch them as they do this, soldiers who are not independent beings at all but appendages of the vast intelligence that is Samsara. Soldiers who have one purpose and one only, to abolish the warlords' reigns and guide humanity back into the fold, the unity of Anatta.

Samsara proper appears too, in its aspect of war: a woman of brilliant crocoite and unforgiving geometry, robed in sun-gleam. Larger than life, nearly four meters in height and with the breadth to match, a figure that shines brighter and realer than any other on the ground. The proxy body has its arms extended, elegant hands held out. The civilians kneel to receive its touch, a golden finger brushing a child's forehead, a lustrous knuckle beneath an elder's chin. They kiss its sleeve.

This is mercy.

She watches until the end; a good citizen does not turn away. She watches and remembers a time when she thought the Warlord of the Mirror was a god. The mind of a child is a malleable construct, easily impressed by size, by the polish of boots and the sheen of gunmetal. But that was long ago, another life, before Anatta remade her and reformed her, from vocabulary down to the myelin sheath. And now she is here, she belongs; she is Samsara's whole and entire.

Suzhen steps into her apartment; the lights come on in tide-green sheets and particulate bettas swim up to her, nuzzling her with duochrome fins. The floor is seabed-dark, soft, swallowing up her feet. What an immense space it is, her home, and how empty. She sheds her clothes as she goes, and in the shower she submits herself to near-scalding water. Cilia scrub at her back, scraping away the day, the murk of catastrophizing. "You're not very happy, citizen," her guidance informs her between lathers.

Interacting with the limited AI is fruitless. It is many rungs below Samsara in scope and parameters. There is no personality to it, only surveillance. "I'm good at my job," she says. But then they all are, it is impossible to be incompetent in this position. A selection agent's success is measured by how well they follow regulations, how their records are untarnished by failed sponsorship. For Suzhen that last is easy—to date, she's sponsored no one. The rest is a matter of coping with the wear and tear of the position, and in that too she performs well, requiring less counseling than some. Her heart has been fortified.

In her bed, seafoam sheets and firm mattress, she slips into a simulation. The lover she's built for herself is a product of memory and footage: a figure that looms above her in armor, face hidden behind a mask and eyes glittering like knifepoints. On occasion she'd

browse through connected sessions, where the array of partners are humans cloaked in anonymous avatars. Once she participated in someone's fantasy, with them playing the role of a halfway house inmate, her the role of a warden. Uniform and baton and tactical gloves. She'd thought this would somehow satisfy her, fix her even, but it only left her feeling dirty and nauseated. She's tended toward solitary gratification since.

(Her guidance encourages her to seek out in-person intimacy, develop an actual relationship. Save for one exception, she roundly refuses. In the physical world, one-night assignations are difficult to anonymize, and she's not going to get temporary body mods for strangers who might bring her home from a club. How to explain to her guidance that she cannot connect with a born Anatta citizen, those who have been class prime from their genesis within a womb-tank. She used to seek the company of other refugees, or those descended from refugees, and—again, save for one exception—found even less to build on. Few admit to being class theta or a probationary resident. Those who have transcended those miserable states are more reluctant still to confess that they were ever anything less. In the end she moved to this city, where few refugees—despite proximity to the processing centers—are settled. Better to be a thread in the velvet fabric of citizenship, better to act as though she too has always been class prime.)

The AI lover is no more sophisticated than her guidance, but specialized differently, all its heuristics devoted to learning her pleasures and preferences. In virtuality she is transported to a warship, the noises of a crew at work in the distance. The AI figure hides her from view with its long cape and hefts her up against the wall. It never takes off its armor or its helm. A warlord image, rendered safe by artifice, far softer and gentler than the genuine articles could possibly be, and far more obliging. A knee parts her thighs, a hand works between her legs. She is veiled from the imaginary crew; she pretends to stifle her sounds, moaning into the AI lover's gauntlet and clinging to its waist. She grips its angular jaw with one hand, imagining that under the mask is a woman's face of surpassing exquisiteness, a full red mouth.

Orgasm is swift, uncomplicated, even if afterward it leaves her faintly dissatisfied. The lack of a weight indenting her bed save her own, the absence of a person waking up next to her in the morning. But the sensory links satisfy her skin hunger, if only just.

Suzhen sleeps for seven uninterrupted hours, her optimal amount of rest. Ninety minutes to spare before she has to leave for work. She brushes her teeth, cleans, dresses. In the living room, she raises her eye to the altar, a small shelf high up with a cup of offerings and an

image of her mother Xinfei. A snapshot taken long before her passing: this was her at fifty-seven, newly arrived on Anatta, body lean from difficult voyages and gaze heavy with the weight of survival. Suzhen used to cry every moment she could find the energy, unable to grasp why she was ripped from the life she knew and forced into one of stunning misery. She'd spent much of their journey here in suspension, curled inside a pod, and each waking would introduce her to a new terror.

"Good morning, Mother," she says as she changes out the offerings—glutinous rice dusted in gold leaf—for a fresh dish of oranges and a sprig of cherry blossom. Another point that makes her appreciate living alone. The altar, her mother: neither of them is something she wants to explain to a born-citizen partner or even temporary bedmate. Never explaining anything, never admitting, is the path of the least resistance but also the least pain.

She draws her coat around herself unnecessarily as she exits her building's lobby. The morning, like the morning preceding it, is as flawless as AI synthesis. The weather is orderly, compliant with the forecast. The climate grids never malfunction, as far as Suzhen knows. On Anatta the rain falls when it is required, snow and sleet when it is the least inconvenient and the most scenic. Her feet glide along the pearly footpath. Not a single flagstone is out of place; a cluster of maintenance drones whir past, scrubbing and polishing as they go. Manicured trees rise to a uniform height, spaced at every eight meters, dripping spindly leaves the color of blood and candlelight. A few extend oblong fruits, matte black and rich, available for any passersby to partake. She doesn't—the color makes her think of frostbitten skin, epidermis so charred it no longer looks part of a human but instead a piece of earth. So easy for flesh to become that on remote stations, the near-abandoned stops her mother had to make on the way to Anatta. Suzhen remembers other refugees who had even less than she and Xinfei did.

She does her best to forget the association of fruit and frostbite. Small things remind, invoking the neural pathways years of readjustments and counselors haven't been able to defuse.

Suzhen is about to board the train when her guidance says, in a voice quite unlike itself, "Agent Suzhen Tang, your presence is requested in House Penumbra Zero-Seventeen."

Her feet click, juddering, against the smooth floor. She looks down at her reflection, a hazy blot on the tiles. She stands absolutely still while her throat closes and her stomach plunges, her pulse stepping up triple-time. Sometimes she thinks, when this happens, that her skin and organs would succumb to gravity and fall away, independent, leaving the rest of her behind. There she would stand,

rooted to the spot, a frame of hollow torso and bones stripped of meat.

Ever since she left one, she has never been to a halfway house. Not to visit, as selection agents can opt to do in a pretense of humanitarian interest. Not to pass by and gawk, as though refugees are zoo exhibits. There are two halfway houses in this city, Penumbra Zero-Seventeen and Antumbra One-Eighty. The former holds candidates that have been judged high-caliber, the ones with no infraction on their profiles, the ones with high potential for integration.

Perhaps it is routine.

She calls a taxi. It floats down, dragonfly body unfurling, gossamer doors shuddering open. Chassis opacity toggles to full once she's inside. "House Penumbra Zero-Seventeen," she says in a flat, remote voice.

From afar the compound looks pleasant, situated in Indriya's outskirts and cupped in the palm of a sculpted hill. A civilized purgatory, much kinder-looking than the one that kept her and her mother all those decades ago. As her taxi descends, it becomes evident that Penumbra is built into the hill so that the land itself imprisons the compound, clutching it in a grip of earth and stone and grass. There are no windows and, from the outside, just one door.

A warden receives her, conducting her straight from the vestibule to a small waiting room: she does not get so much as a glimpse of the inmates. The warden is dark, late seventies and plump, and though she's in uniform—that deep green found at the bottom of a pond—there is to her an odd discomfort, as though she's not used to wearing it, to bearing arms. "We've got a particular candidate," the warden is saying, "and most agents have reached their quota this month."

So they have. So has she. She wonders at the warden's point. None is forthcoming: instead the warden disappears, presumably to fetch the particular candidate. Suzhen leans back in the tight, uncomfortable chair, and glances at the leaded pane which looks out to and displays nothing. Because she has to, she listens and strains her ears. Silence. The walls are entirely soundproof to ensure solitude. It was like this for her, too, existing within a table of time precisely allotted. This many minutes for a meal, this many hours for sleep, all in complete isolation. Not even permitted her mother's company. Afterward, she learned that there was a possibility she might have been adopted by Anatta parents to ease assimilation. Only by an agent's capricious mercy and outside intervention did she leave the house with her mother. Two months in the halfway house and she'd have done anything to return to the camp, where she slept curled in her mother's arms, where she had others to speak to—a place where she'd still thought herself a person.

It is such a small room, the lighting an anemic silver: the chair, the table and the floor are clean but empty. A halfway house does not receive guests. It receives inspectors and inmates: this is not a human place. And now she is on the other side of it, as despicably unhuman as the rest.

The door slides. The warden precedes; behind her follows a figure in an inmate's shapeless smock. At the warden's instruction, the inmate steps forward.

They stand nearly two meters tall, broad-shouldered and pale-skinned. This person's eyes are alert, taking in Suzhen, a new variable that must at once be incorporated into the formula of survival. Calculation done at the velocity of machines, or feral things. Their long arms and shins are bruised by restraints, injection sites puckered like slag. Late forties or newly fifty, Suzhen judges, though the camps make people look much older than they are.

"This is Ovuha," the warden says. No last name. No refugee has one—in the camps they are stripped of their past, rendered a blank canvas on which Samsara may write. "I've sent you her profile, Agent."

Suzhen holds Ovuha's gaze. The refugee is gaunt, cheeks recessed and skin taut, and yet she recognizes that either Ovuha was born of fortunate genes or she was tailored with no expenses spared—such options are available even in the colonies. The columnal neck the hue of fresh ivory, the wide generous mouth the shade of pomegranates, the cut-glass jawline as accentuated as statuary. Someone pored over her projected phenotype, going over the shape of skull and the scope of brow, the cartilage that would make up the nose and the ears. Each angle was deliberated upon to ensure elegance. Malnourished and haggard as she is, still Ovuha would stand out as a product of polished genesis.

"Hello, Ovuha," Suzhen says. "Please, sit."

Ovuha does. Her hands fold on the table rather than in her lap and her gaze is steady, direct without being confrontational. She says nothing and it occurs to Suzhen that she will remain silent until prompted: that is a habit any refugee learns. Never speak until spoken to. Any utterance may be used against you.

The woman's file says she came from a world called Gurudah, held by the Warlord of the Comet. She has incurred no infraction—not even one—either in the camps or in Penumbra, having answered neither provocation from wardens or other inmates. Her physical condition is exceptional, apparently from hard labor: her interviews indicate she used to work as a colony technician and agricultural supervisor. Evaluations show that her knowledge bases, specialized and general, match that assertion. This is a star candidate. "Warden,"

Suzhen says, “would you mind leaving her to me?”

They are left alone, if monitored. Suzhen’s guidance is providing her with interview routines, the questions she could ask to break the ice and begin the interrogation—why do you want to be here, what do you see yourself giving to Anatta, why do you want to become part of this world, do you know the prime directive of Samsara. Cicatrices pock Ovuha’s collarbones and throat, sites of implants that have long since been removed and left to badly scar. Scans have detected no neural links or augmentations left on Ovuha, who likely bargained those away for covert passage on a series of ships. First material belongings, then body parts. Many arrive here missing kidneys, lungs, limbs.

“Tell me something.” This is not part of the Bureau-mandated script; Suzhen rarely follows those. “Pretend we are strangers at a chance meeting, waiting for the same train. It’s running late. That doesn’t happen much, and we’ve got time to kill.”

Ovuha regards her for a few seconds, the corners of her mouth lifting. “In a bid to be interesting, I’d ask, *Do you know anything about hawks?* I might show you this scar on my wrist—” She lifts her wrist, turns it. There is a scar, one among many on her body, that looks to have been the result of deep laceration. “Then I’d tell you a story of how I was too stubborn to let my mentor handle this one bird. I was determined to walk it that day, even though the poor animal was too new, too nervous, and it kept digging and digging in. Talons can do a lot of damage to human skin.”

The refugee’s voice has a smooth cadence, her Putonghua melodious. It’s not an accent Suzhen has ever heard and it is effortless, as though Ovuha often spoke it in her place of nativity. “You’re getting ahead of yourself, you were going to start with what hawks are like, the basics.”

“Of course. They’re some of the most difficult creatures to tame—a little like people. My first was the bitterest animal I’d ever seen; it hated me so viscerally, like my existence was this terrible injury, this mortal insult. When you look into its eyes, it’s easy to forget you’re both bigger and stronger. All that evolution as predator works in a hawk’s favor. The inside of their mouths! Such monsters. They almost don’t have any concept of fear. In that, nothing like people.”

She wonders if Ovuha has rehearsed this, though she can’t imagine any refugee planning to entertain a selection agent with anecdotes and factoids about hawks. “Are you more like a hawk, or like a person?”

“I would point to my shoes to show that I haven’t any talons. No wings or beaks. Yes, I believe I’m most like a person, if I am like anything.”

What a surprise, Suzhen thinks, that Ovuha has such a pristine record. It's not that she is sarcastic or insolent, but Suzhen would have thought someone like this would anger a warden almost at first sight. The natural comportment, the lack of submission. This is a person who acts as if she's not gone through the camps, a person whose dignity is preternaturally intact. The strength of feeling that seizes Suzhen jolts her. It is not admiration; it is fury that freezes her blood and thickens her gullet, irrational and cardiac. "And how is a hawk tamed?" How calm she can make her voice.

Ovuha tilts her head. "When it is captured, the hawk catastrophizes and prepares for the worst. In this moment of terror its brain resets, becomes a blank state on which the trainer may etch new neural connections, new associations. The hawk is exposed to sensory overload. It is starved and deprived of rest. It is shocked into obedience, and it learns to fear something as innocuous as a glove. After, you'll have a beast of a time flying the bird, and every occasion you let it off the creance is a gamble. Will it return in submission, or will it overcome the terror you've taught it at last and flee? But for the most part this method works, and it is favored for speed. It is true: there's much more alike between hawk and human than I made it out, and I haven't been consistent. And so you, a stranger I've met at a train platform and whose bench I'm sharing, have caught me out on falconry."

Is this true submission, Suzhen wonders, or just a gesture at contrition. Ovuha knows she's displeased the selection agent but she is, still, not obeisant. As quickly as it came, Suzhen's rage dissipates. In its place, a nebulous thing that's nearly like relief. Her breath evens. Something inside her loosens. "You're very odd, Ovuha. But I'll sponsor you. For the next six months I will be your caseworker and you a probationary resident. I trust you will work hard and not let me down. Welcome to Anatta."

Finally, to say that.

Chapter Two

"Good morning, citizen. Today you have scheduled an orientation with Potentiate Ovuha at ten thirty. She has been chipped and awaits you at House Penumbra, and her assigned residence is at the Jasmine. For the next seven days you are released from your duties at the Bureau, and you may request more time as required to optimize your potentiate."

Suzhen lies in her bed, staring up at the soothing waveforms that run across her ceiling, their dawn-gray lightening to match the morning. Silver transmuting to faded bruise. She browses through the guidelines of what she is supposed to do with a potentiate, not that she hasn't perused them many times to the point of fixation. There is always that fantasy she's harbored, of showing compassion as she has been—only no, that is wrong; when it was their turn the agent gave them nothing and it was her mother who wrung survival out of stone, who carved so much out of so vanishingly little. "I'm going to arrange her finances," she says aloud, though the rest of her wishes nothing more than to stay in bed. "Then I'm taking her to shop for clothes and toiletries."

At home her guidance manifests as a dollish creature the size of her hand. Its fox face, an inverted isosceles, regards her with cool patience. "The potentiate will need to prepare for her first test, citizen."

"I'll drill her on civic duties soon enough." Toiletries, clothes, accessories, the essentials of personhood. To own things—the frivolities most of all—is to feel human. Especially after that long in detainment, though Ovuha's file does indicate she's been in the camp for only a couple months, in Penumbra for one. Three months in total, the fastest she's ever seen any candidate get out and permitted into civilization. Even then, three months in limbo, stripped of name and belongings and wants. She thinks of what Ovuha said about the taming of a hawk.

She has her guidance and house drone to prepare an outfit, instructing it for semi-formal, slightly showy. When she's done eating breakfast, she comes back to her room to see a high-necked dress, the upper half a complex honeycomb, the lower half a narrow skirt that stops at her knee on one side and drapes over her ankle on the other. It suffices. She turns to her cosmetics and animated tattoos, and has the wall project her face. Bronze glaze for her eyelids, a fluttering rose-gold flower on her right cheek, foiled-platinum eyelash extensions. She continues until her cheeks are nearly as sculpted as her guidance's, her nose as sharp as a blade.

This time Ovuha is waiting for her in Penumbra's lobby, a larger, airier space than the interview cell. A different warden and two guard drones flank her. They've put Ovuha in slightly less ugly clothes, though still gray, and there is a patch of inflamed skin on her left shoulder. The site where the tracker went in, there to monitor everything she does for her probationary period. Where she goes, what she eats, how many hours a night she sleeps. There the tracker will remain for the next six to twelve months.

"You have been granted a stipend, by the grace of Samsara," Suzhen says as they leave Penumbra behind, and names the figure.

Ovuha looks over her shoulder, once, at the halfway house. The prison. Her expression is bland and no frisson of emotion disturbs it, no relief as having been liberated, no seizing terror at knowing she might be sent back here any time. "It must be very generous, though I don't know enough what that'd buy. We don't get updates on exchange rates, out there."

It is not in fact generous, and far below any citizen's guaranteed income. "Housing will be provided for you. The stipend will cover power, food, utilities. I'll help you set up an account—it'll be linked to mine, and I'll be able to see all your transactions so keep that in mind—and after that, we should get you certified for any skills you have got. The sooner we can get you employed, the better."

Her charge looks out the window as the taxi lifts off; she doesn't seem awestruck or even impressed by the architecture of Gweilan District, the concentric circles that make up its center, the petal-thoroughfares that radiate outward. Every curve and circumference have been accounted for, the interaction of this spiral building with the slant of that walkway. Windows are angled to catch and hold the sunray so that every skyscraper has the fire of black opals. Each city has its own gemstone, its own language of elegance. Ovuha turns back to Suzhen. "You're very brisk and efficient."

"I'm a bureaucrat."

At this Ovuha laughs, a low thrum. "Not the first quality one associates with bureaucrats, efficiency."

"I didn't imagine bureaucrats were much in evidence in the colonies."

A strange expression passes over Ovuha's features. "The colonies. I'm still not used to them being called that. We call them countries, if we call them anything. And anywhere there is human society there is bureaucracy. We create rules, and rules convolute, and there must be a steward to make sense of them."

She knows, of course, that they don't call themselves colonies. Those barren, broken worlds. The settlements that abide under heavy shielding, insulated against killing gases and lethal organisms, or

rotting stations orbiting a dead planet. Terraforming is an ancient dream, as extinct as humanity's predecessors. Suzhen does not apologize or correct herself over *the colonies*. "Your skillsets, then. Much of what you can do, we automate on Anatta. Some of your technical expertise might transfer well here, pending certification. You've got skill with heavy machinery and—cartography and linguistics?" A surprise, but the colonies are not without their stratification, their fine education. "Those are interesting, and could have academic uses; your contribution potential is good there. Until we can come to something better, you could look into service work. Pricier establishments use human staff. Demanding but the money's fair, I hear, as long as you pass the training. I'll put together a list of options and we'll work through them together."

Ovuha remains quiet as they enter the commercial block, a series of spheres nested against one another, the shops clinging to the inside of each sphere. Advertisements from confectioners and ateliers pulsate on the corridors, steps of concourse lighting up and inviting shoppers to sample the latest in fashion, perfume, tableware. Fragrances pursue them in clouds, cinnamon and passionfruit, spiced grape and peach wine. Those with wealth wear it on their hair, curls of circuitry and synthetic ivory, tortoiseshell notations dangling from their ears. Some wear it more subtly, in luster lining the hollows of throat or temples, tasteful but muted body mods—scales strategically scattered, nacreous hairline, void-pearl earlobes.

Suzhen watches Ovuha observe; once more there is a lack. Neither awe nor any admission that this is novel, full of extravagance she could never imagine where she came from. She wonders, faintly, if Ovuha would have reacted differently if they'd gone to one of the utilitarian outlets. Extruded products, automaton service. It is not that she means to impress her charge—or she does, she concedes to herself, the vicious part that wants to witness Ovuha's brittleness, evidence that this person is more than her perfect candidate score, her unshakable poise.

They slip into a boutique. The clothes come in preconfigured sets, though for a little extra, modular pieces can be purchased and assembled into custom outfits. An attendant greets them, and if Ovuha's status is obvious to them—the inmate's rags—they pass no remark. Once Suzhen has established that Ovuha is the one in need of clothes, the attendant turns one of the mannequins into an image of Ovuha. Inevitably it is more glamorous than the real thing, looking better-fed and groomed, pores smoothed over by cosmetics. A coquettish tilt of the head, fingertips coyly touching the chin, a red smile that shows perfect teeth. Ovuha stares at the mannequin and says to Suzhen in a low voice, "Should I be able to afford this?"

“It’ll come out of my salary, so yes. Tell them you need a couple professional outfits.”

Ovuha gives her a startled look, but the attendant is already pulling her away to take measurements. They leave with pleated high-collared shirts, jackets with slashed sleeves and titanium thread, angular trousers. Ovuha runs her hand down the fabric, touching lightly, in something that at last resembles wonder.

They eat on the observation deck, in a restaurant where each table has its own partition and privacy filter. The table is smoky quartz and the window gives a clear, uninterrupted view of Samsara’s order: the climate grid high overhead, yielding slow rain. A city crow perches on the ledge outside, seeking shelter. Ovuha cants toward it, watching it with interest, meeting its black-pearl gaze. “Birds have perfect parallax vision,” she says, as though it is the beginning or continuation of a conversation, but she stops there.

The food arrives. A pot of chrysanthemum tea for them both. Suzhen’s pan-fried dumplings, stuffed with chives and meat. Ovuha’s noodle soup, wiry yellow coils in thick broth, dusted in spring onion and shredded pork. Good comfort food, Suzhen would say, but also the cheapest dish on the menu, meant to cost Suzhen as little as possible. Ovuha savors each spoonful, sipping the broth quietly but deliberately; she is making every mouthful last, inhaling the steam, letting the noodle sit on her tongue.

(Suzhen remembers this: the first taste of real food after exiting a halfway house. A steamed bun. Even now that memory remains in total clarity, the soft texture of the dough, the rich sweetness of the lotus-seed paste, the punch of salt in the yolk. She wept as she ate.)

Over dessert—she leaves Ovuha the lion’s share of the steamed cake—she opens a remote link to configure Ovuha’s account for social, financial, and security uses. Because Ovuha has no active neural link at all, the tracker being the only online component on her, she will need an external device. Suzhen opens the kit that’s standard-issue for a potentiate, takes out the slim portable and synchronizes it. She hands this to Ovuha. “This is worn on the wrist. You won’t need help learning to use this, I expect.”

“I do need to learn a great many things, officer. Only I do not wish to impose so much on you, over and over.” Ovuha does not leave crumbs. There is refinement to the motion of her fingers, even in handling food. Those tapered, callused fingers which belong to a laborer, a technician.

Despite herself, Suzhen speculates: who this woman was before, what advantages she possessed, what gave her these manners and this confidence. Not that status in the colonies means anything once the person is on Anatta, reduced, pared down to Bureau quantification.

Previous wealth, previous position, all that is wiped out. The process of asylum equalizes. “I’m your caseworker. Whether or not you like it, I’ll be spending most of my time with you for half a year. Less if you can become independent before then.”

Ovuha blinks at her slowly. “I said only what I meant. What you do is above and beyond. I do not know how it is that I may repay you, as the rodent does not know how to repay an elephant.”

Ovuha’s register has grown more formal as she speaks until it reaches that, a proverb, her language turning as calligraphic as a painting. Again Suzhen’s temper flares. She tamps it down. How stupid, how petty. There is nothing in this foreign woman, this finely made creature, that should provoke her. She is not a warden, she is not one of those sadists. Taking her trauma out on a potentiate will not ease her past, will not undo her own injury. “What I am doing is my job. Your integration as a citizen who can serve Samsara is my duty and priority.”

“Purpose shapes what we are. To perform none is to forfeit one’s place in the human order.” Ovuha polishes off the last of the cake. “The subtleties and contours of it all pale before that stark truth, don’t they?”

The partition around them parts; the privacy filter toggles off. The restaurant’s air turns to fragrant gold and the fresh dew of a new day. Song fills the deck, silencing public feeds, suffusing both the restaurant’s physical space and each citizen’s personal datasphere. This is not a normal broadcast. It is Samsara, the deific force, the supreme intelligence. That which encompasses.

The AI has chosen to manifest as a projected image, city-vast, a presence of sheer scale. Behind its landscape body a single banner flies, one that Suzhen has seen before, if not as familiar to her as the Mirror. A lattice of thornworks, pointed inward to itself, the outside a smooth hexagon. Sigil of one of the greatest wasteland rulers, the commander whose armada is said to be numberless, the one general whose force could breach the sanctity of Anatta. The Warlord of the Thorn.

Behind Samsara, the banner burns, crisping to soot at the edges.

When Samsara speaks, its voice is petal-sweet. “Long ago the great architects created me with one purpose: to serve and protect humanity from the wounds it seeks to inflict upon itself, to kill the seeds of its self-destruction before they can flower. To guide you onto a path of peace is my greatest duty. Today another wall before my prime directive falls. The Warlord of the Thorn has been vanquished and humankind is one step closer to unity. The wild dominions will soon end and all of Anatta’s children will be returned to their rightful cradle.”

Diners and servers alike stop what they are doing; glasses and cutlery are put down in sudden chorus, and as one they break into applause that vibrates through the deck, an avalanche of voices and clapping hands and stamping feet. Outside the window Samsara too declares this victory, its image laying ownership to the sky, the burning banner crumbling to ashes in its hands. There is no footage of the warlord's death or capture, a figure in armor lying in blood and smoke perhaps, but later there will be. There must always be clear, undeniable evidence, a grotesquerie of twisted limbs and melted helm. But not now, in the moment of divine communion. The facts and figures, how subjects of the Thorn will be dealt with, those too will come in time—the mundane things, the moving parts that would dilute the grand statement.

The high spirit goes on. Other tables call for liquor, a server arrives to say everything is on the house. For politeness Suzhen asks for a tigersmoke cocktail. Ovuha demurs. When the waiter is gone Ovuha's hand convulses on the table, her knuckles white. She breathes deeply, in, out. In a few minutes she steadies herself. Her neck is rigid, her expression wiped clean of feeling.

Suzhen sips her tigersmoke when it comes. The whirligig glass is captivatingly pretty and the taste of the cocktail is just right, laced with rose salt and gentle stimulants, a marvel of flavor notes. She thinks to ask whether the Thorn was Ovuha's warlord, whether Ovuha was ever required to tear an image to shreds, but she does not.

Here it is. Ovuha as breakable as anyone.

Taheen's gallery sprawls across a terrace that stretches over the largest lake in Huajing District. Being here gives the impression of floating, the floor as translucent as jellyfishes and seemingly as unmoored. There is no human help. The units that assist Taheen are creatures with faceted faces, mouthless and spindly-limbed, with semi-precious gemstone eyes: spinels and rutiles, turquoises and aquamarines. Taheen has affectionately named each after its stone.

Mannequins line the windows, seated and standing, lying on their side or their back. A few stretch in croisé devant, though what they wear has nothing to do with ballet. Every shape is modeled, the statuesque and the squat, tapering and flaring torsos, thin and bulky limbs, and no two outfits are alike. One mannequin wears a waterfall bodice, the left sleeve slender and piscine, the right broad and draconic. The next is dressed in frosted glass and ceramic shards; the next still is in a brocade of jagged granite, gray slashed through with obsidian. There is a propensity for sharp things, as though the outfits are meant to wound the wearer and then dispose of themselves when that purpose has been fulfilled—assassination by haute couture.

Most expect Taheen to be narrowly made, cadaverous, but they're broad and plump. Today they leave their heavy breasts bare, painted in animated calligraphy that has been scripted against cohesion: it is always gibberish that moves across fat and muscle and amber skin. Gorgeous gibberish, cascades of fragmented code and kaleidoscope poetry.

"You invest too easily," they are saying as they light up. A ruby cigarette. This has a much deeper aroma than those they give Suzhen, oodh and sandalwood, a hint of camphor. Spumes of bladed phantoms rise. "Is the refugee—sorry, the potentiate—pretty to look at?"

"That's a repulsive thing to ask, Taheen." Suzhen picks at the dessert one of the automata has brought. Chiseled ice pastry on the outside, molten egg yolk on the inside, salt-sweet. It is peculiar, slightly unpleasant, as all gourmet inventions seem to be. "I don't ever look at any of them that way. And I should say that you invest nothing at all."

They laugh around the cigarette, the cylinder effortlessly clasped in their mouth. "Why, how should I invest myself? Donate my income? Your Bureau neither needs nor accepts it, my delightful friend; Samsara provides. You've misplaced yourself, you know."

"I've got more paid vacation time than I could ever need." This is an argument the two of them have had many times. It is rote. Still they continue to have it, insist on it, this routine between them as tried as breathing.

"Yes, yes, paid vacation. Very nice." Taheen takes a long drag of the cigarette. The smoke they exhale is tinged red, strands of asymmetric helices. "Changing the system from the inside never works out, Suzhen. What happens is you become part of it, another function in the system, while nothing changes at all. You really could be putting your time elsewhere. It bothers me that you don't sing anymore."

Another component. Another function. This point Suzhen never responds to, on account of having no answer for it. To admit they are right is defeat, to refute it impossible. "How does designing dresses affect systems?"

"It doesn't," they say, laughing again. "But I've never set out to do any such thing. I'm not a political person and don't pretend to be. What I want to do is create exquisite costumes to put on exquisite bodies. Listen, I met an actor. She's fantastic at what she does and terribly your type, artistically and personally. Why don't I set up an introduction?"

"I'm busy." In her ear the guidance pushes her to accept.

"Nonsense. I'm calling her. Hold on."

Taheen disappears into their backroom, leaving her alone with

the mannequins, the excess of fabric and the gemstone assistants. Aquamarine approaches, asking if she'd like a smoke or something to drink. They all speak with variations on a single voice, the voice of Taheen's parent. Suzhen knows this because they sat in the same selection lobby, the only two children there at the time. Taheen was orphaned much sooner than she, left to fend for themselves while still probationary, then adopted by an eccentric painter. Taheen doesn't speak much of those years, and Suzhen expects there is a reason the automata do not speak with the painter's voice. They are the only fellow ex-potentiate she has stayed in touch with. Someone to whom she can speak openly because there is no need to hide the fact of her history.

(Not that they share with each other which wasteland world they were from, what their parents used to do, who they used to be; whether they left family or friends behind, inasmuch as children remember those. Neither she nor Taheen shares whether their world or station was conquered by the Peace Guard first or if their parents preemptively fled. But otherwise, openly.)

When Taheen returns, it is with a triumphant smirk. "I've arranged it. There will be a play and this actress is the lead. Seats are sold out, but what do I care for rules? You'll make time for it, yes?"

"You know I would because it's you doing the asking. But I'd rather watch you make clothes."

They click their tongue. "Yes, I'm phenomenal and so are my designs, but you need people. My clothes don't talk. My drones don't count."

She stares at Rutile, at its glittering gaze and the bland sweetness of its countenance. "Don't they? But they're lovely." As lovely as Taheen, though she has never been able to say that, somehow; it seems like belaboring the obvious—the way it would be to say the sun is bright or that dharma is righteous.

"You're looking sad again. I do hate that." They sit by her, patting their lap. "I'll distract you and then you can go have a proper social outing. Come here."

Suzhen does. It is comfort offered, and she has never been able to turn that away, not from Taheen. Rather the opposite. This is what she hungers for, her only vice. The lines of their body are long and patrician, and she falls into them as a puzzle-piece might fall into its slot: such is the force of habit, of attraction. They kiss her gently, they have always been careful as though they believe she is sugar and fired earth, prone to cracking or dissolving at the slightest pressure. She has never dissuaded them, has never admitted she wants more force. That they would do this for her is boon enough, a benison of touch that holds—for a time—the weight of her past at bay. An aegis, a prayer,

an act close to holy.

Taheen smells of lemongrass. A scent she's come to associate with good sex, the best sex.

Between their thumb and forefinger they roll one of her nipples, and lick down across her collarbones. She cups their breast in turn, kneading, then plunging her hand down to undo their jeweled sarong. In nudity Taheen is a vision. On Anatta, citizens are entitled to the body of their desire, skeleton and flesh and features answering precisely to individual needs and wants. Whether Taheen has received modification she will never know—and she will not ask—but she's always thought the shape of them is god-made, divinely mandated. That glorious expanse of hips, those wide thighs hardened from exercise, which she kisses and licks and worships. More animated calligraphy shimmers around their knees, scrolling round and round, distorting and warping into golden shadows.

Her eyes clench shut as they sip sweat off her throat, her nipples. When they enter her it is slow and impossibly tender, and she responds as she ever does, wrapping her limbs around them and moving with them: two tides in concert.

Much better than the virtual lover, the simple AI. Much better than anyone else she's ever been with: they have the spark, the element that is missing from any other, the fire that ignites her own. For a time they lie entangled, Taheen still deep in her. Musk in the air. Suzhen breathes deep and knows that she cannot have this person, not beyond the physical—they are star-fire and she is clay. This is a favor, an obligation, done for whatever reason that prevents Taheen from dismissing her as a failed social appendage and at last casting her aside. But they are so solid against her that she does not want to think of that, not now, not yet. After a union like this, she wants to whisper her gratitude like prayer. Except that would break the delicate equilibrium between the two of them. Taheen would not brook her thanks, might even be embarrassed by it.

They separate. Taheen lets her stay in the circle of their arms a little longer and she nestles her cheek against the curve of their throat.

"My clients would never expect me to do anything so vulgar right in the gallery," they murmur. Their chuckle travels down, vibrating against her jaw. "They think I treat this place like a temple. I let them —it's more amusing."

She wants, desperately, to keep them here. To remain against the soft-hard planes of their flesh, to join them in the sheets. "It's a good thing you don't have human help to walk in on such activities." Which they must do with plenty others: she knows for a fact that at any time, they have four to five lovers, occasionally several at once in bed. Most, she imagines, do not have her baggage.

Taheen rises, eventually: they have a project to complete. They've never asked her to stay the night and she has taken the hint. If there is anything she has learned on Anatta, it is to take what she's given and ask for no more. She pushes herself upright. The drone assistants have discreetly disappeared, did not stay to spectate.

Suzhen turns to the news, for the same reason she might scratch at a scab, push at an aching tooth. There, the facts and the figures. How much incoming population they can expect from the Thorn's newly liberated subjects, how off-world facilities have been prepared to hold them—most on satellites, a few on more distant outposts. This will be the largest influx of asylum seekers in Suzhen's lifetime—she checks Bureau statistics and finds that it will be the largest influx period. And if the Thorn's fall means inevitable defeat of the other remaining warlord, if that means more displaced populations…

Is it any of her problem, she thinks, when she is no more than a cog. She is not one of Samsara's chosen administrators, she does not make or modify policy. Her history is what it is: commonplace, dull. It does not empower her or even equip her to do her work better. It does not let her do good. There are regulations, there is process, and she follows them like any other.

Perhaps Taheen is right; perhaps after Ovuha, she should consider a career change.

On the news a human officer comes on, a man with a crooked snub nose, dressed in Interior Defense black. In a tone of complete piety, he announces that every last civilian freed from the Thorn's dominion will be made welcome, that the doors of benediction will be thrown wide. A lie, but Suzhen never expects more.

Chapter Three

There is a solid delay between Suzhen ringing the door and Ovuha answering it. Ovuha is in—she can track the potentiate's location in real time. She could simply override the door, but she opts not to. The access she commands to Ovuha's existence is comprehensive. No point salting the wound.

She waits. A sound of something fragile breaking, down the corridor. Domestic disputes are not uncommon in these places and the walls are not soundproof. Growing up she came to regard the noise as ambient, inevitable. Crying, adult or child. Screaming toddlers. On occasion it spills into the hallway: tearful husbands in disarray, adolescent children storming out, flights of dinnerware. The lives here are both slow—waiting out the probation period, waiting for the next caseworker visit, waiting—and fraught, existence teetering on a cusp, uncertain and unstable. Probationary residency can be snatched away at any time, or so it feels. The state stipend is sufficient but only in the barest of ways, calculated for a definition of enough that leaves no room for food that tastes like food, clothes that make one feel human. This complex is called the Jasmine, a name she finds repulsive in its euphemism, named after a pretty and fragrant flower when the truth of such housing is anything but.

The door opens. Ovuha steps back, her head lowered as if to nullify the twenty-five centimeters she has over Suzhen. The lighting is dim, the window darkened, and the air thick with poor ventilation. A bathroom, a bedroom, a corner partitioned off in pretense that the occupant might get the chance to entertain guests or while away their leisure. But Ovuha has kept it all clean, the mattress and sheets straight, the hard floor smooth and unstained.

It takes a whole moment before she spots the bruises.

They are still new, still red, a patch of blunt trauma down the left side of Ovuha's face. Her lower lip is split. Now that Suzhen knows what to look for, she realizes Ovuha is also moving oddly, as if recovering from being winded. "You're going to tell me what happened."

"It is nothing."

"I decide whether it is something, potentiate."

Ovuha smooths her hand over the uninjured side of her face, fingers crooked briefly as though twitching to scratch the bruises. "A spouse from the couple next door. I understand his wife has been abusing him. The dysfunction had to go somewhere."

"And so you let him vent it on you?" Suzhen opens her briefcase, peels open the first-aid kit. She pulls on sanitizing gloves and squeezes

out the protean, spreading it on Ovuha's jawline, up nearly all the way to her temple. It will reduce inflammation, anesthetize, and speed up healing. A panacea for surface wounds. "Take off your shirt. You were punched or kicked in the gut."

"This must be the most wholesome context for *take off your shirt* I've ever encountered." Ovuha unzips the shapeless top.

As Suzhen suspected, another bruise, this one purpling. To the flank rather than to the stomach. She accesses the tracker's diagnostic: no fracture or broken ribs. Ovuha avoided the worst of the damage, either shielding herself well or dodging while making it seem as though the blow solidly connected. "I wasn't notified that you were in a physical altercation. You didn't fight back."

Ovuha lifts her arm, letting Suzhen coat her flank in protean. She winces slightly at the contact of cold paste on skin. "I didn't. If you are asking whether I could have, yes, I suppose."

Suzhen sheds her gloves and steps back. True to her professed history, Ovuha has the physique of someone used to hard labor, to the necessities that keep the body from softening. Detainment pared her down to ribcage and jutting pelvic bones, but still she's in better shape than most. Ovuha could have handled herself, one on one. "A citizen's guidance would have prevented that from happening at all." The first sign of violence would have alerted the nearest Interior Defense drone while the guidance warns the aggressor of the consequences. "I'm not saying you should beat a teenage boy within an inch of his life. But you could have alerted me. If not me, someone will come."

Ovuha leans back on the bed, her smile warped by hardening, translucent protean. "If not you. Whoever comes wouldn't necessarily distinguish who began the fight. I wish to keep my head down, officer, and be at my best. It'd be naïve of me to expect your colleagues to be as empathic as you."

"Don't accuse me of empathy," Suzhen says flatly. It may be the dimness, the compressed space—the projects have such mean, tight rooms, every floor partitioned into as many units as possible—but she wishes she was back in the corridor. Noise or not, it is a transitional place. The room is a terminus. "The first-aid kit I'll leave here. Your attacker will be dealt with by his caseworker, but I don't want to see a repeat. Next time anyone threatens you, you will report it before it gets physical. How are you settling in otherwise?"

"I've made a few acquaintances, though most everyone here keeps to themselves." A pause. "Aren't you going to ask whether I've pawned off the clothes you bought me?"

"They're yours to do with as you wish. I also think you're more sensible than that."

"I worry," Ovuha murmurs, "that your kindness would be taken

advantage of—but that is not my place. Would you like to see the roof? It's the building's best feature."

Which says little, but she is glad for an excuse to get out. Ovuha shrugs on a loose shirt. The elevator is archaic, stale and rusty-smelling, not because there are no funds allocated to upgrade it but because they are on purpose kept this way. To be a citizen is to deserve; to be a probationary resident is to deserve much less. The privileges, the rights, the ability to experience joy without rationing or compromise.

The rooftop is expansive, an open-air garden. Potted flowerbeds white with arachno-floral hybrids that weave fragrant photosynthetic web, waiting to ambush insects. Trellises in spheres and pyramids, some thinly draped in skeleton vines, others smothered in clouds of fire-roses with cinderous petals and thorns like blasted steel. The result is strange and incoherent but, Suzhen realizes, untouched by AI aesthetic. Samsara's order does not reach here because it is beneath notice.

The corner Ovuha has claimed is secluded behind spotted ferns. A miniature stone garden—truly miniature, the shelf no longer than thirty-five centimeters—where narrow vases hold stunted trees and braided shrubs. Ovuha's contribution is a titanium cage, tall and polished, its luster as clean as new bone. The bird inside sports plumage in scarab-blue, each feather hammered to razor thinness. Bronze legs, crimson beaks. It bears no resemblance to hawks or falcons, yet it is good craftsmanship, the sort Suzhen might see in an eccentric's collection. Quaint and expensive. It trills at her, unmusically.

"It's lovely," Suzhen offers, wondering what Ovuha did to acquire it.

"One of the families on my floor can't speak Putonghua very well. I'm tutoring them here and there, not that I'm much of a teacher. They gave me the bird." Ovuha opens the cage and extends her wrist for the replicant. "They brought it from their home, a station hidden in an asteroid belt. I don't know what you call it, but they call the place Wyomere. Destroyed long since, caught in crossfire. The family took the bird apart, smuggled the pieces separately so they wouldn't be confiscated. A leg held by a child, a wing secreted behind clothes, a gyroscope cluster worn around the neck. Can you imagine? The distance people will go just to keep a memento."

"And they gave it to a near-stranger?"

"A total stranger." Ovuha lightly strokes the bird's back. "They felt I wouldn't be stolen from and wanted me to keep it as long as I live here. Not an impression I ought to make after I let a scrawny teenage boy beat me up. People are strange, don't you think?"

People are drawn to strength, either because it is a threat or because they see in it the promise of protection. Suzhen imagines Ovuha through the lenses of the bird's previous owners, this woman who is so new a potentiate and yet self-contained. At ease within her own skin, despite her status, despite being placed in this gray, worn building. The dignity that does not yield. "What do you want out of your life in Anatta?"

Ovuha continues to groom the bird, running an oiled comb through its feathers. "I'm not a person of ambition. I'll prioritize repaying the generosity that's been shown me, first."

"I'm asking what you want. Not what you can do for Anatta."

"It is your kindness that I meant, not that of the world at large." Ovuha wipes off excess oil, checks under the coverts. She scrapes off gritty rust and nods to herself, satisfied. "What I want is a life where I make no enemies, where I don't bend myself toward anyone's destruction. And if that is not possible, nevertheless I'll live as though it is. But—" She makes a low chuckle. "You must not take me seriously."

Statement or request: there is no telling. It is not that Ovuha is unbreakable, rather that she evades so skillfully that the qualities confuse. Seeming is not the same as being, even so, and Suzhen imagines herself on the edge of a cliff. To fall is to admit to Ovuha what she is, that mere decades separate them, probationary resident to Selection Bureau worker. Who were you really, what did you do, did you leave behind family: these things she wants to shout. But under Samsara's gaze there is no room for an exchange of secrets, least of all the ones her mother took with her to the grave, and which with Suzhen intends to do the same. When she is ashes, if anyone survives her, perhaps it will be safe to tell. "You are full of noble ideals, Ovuha."

"Not in the least, I just prefer to keep out of trouble. Could I have a surname soon? Having a legal identity without one feels so odd."

Suzhen pulls up a list before remembering that Ovuha lacks the visual augmentation to see it. She switches on a display, projects it on the ferns. "Here are the available ones, pick what you like best and I'll have it registered."

Ovuha studies the names, perhaps counting the syllables and sounding each out in her head, measuring the meaning of each character. After a moment she says, "If it's not too much trouble, you could choose it for me."

She has assigned surnames to candidates before, it is not new or even strange, a favor she does for probationary residents whose grasp of Putonghua doesn't extend to the nuances in a name. But this feels almost too intimate, somehow, too close. No: that's only imagination,

her runaway mind seeking connection and common ground. “Sui,” she says. “How’s that sound? Ovuha Sui.”

“A monarchic name,” Ovuha murmurs. She sweeps into a deep bow, as if she’s been handed a gift, as if this signifies anything more than a caseworker’s routine task. “It is incandescent. Thank you. Let me show you this.”

They walk to the rooftop’s edge, Ovuha’s hand held out, the bird gleaming in the sun. She whispers and flings it outward. With a cry it takes flight, a blazing titanium vector, a flash of bronze talons across the clear, radiant sky. They watch it climb higher and higher until it disappears.

It will come back, Ovuha says. Tame birds are precisely like humans in that way. The pathological sense of home, the inability to let go.

Within a day, Ovuha’s bruises have faded to faint smears. Suzhen covers them up with a thin layer of tinted emollients, adds pigment to Ovuha’s hairline and under her cheekbones so that the gauntness seems intentional and sophisticated, rather than a byproduct of privation. Mauve lips, ombré-black in the center. To the steel-gray angular clothes, Suzhen adds a scarf Taheen gave her that she felt too refined to wear herself. The fabric is slick and opalescent, the texture like faceted fur as though it was shorn alive from a jewel animal. Ovuha wears it noose-tight: on her it sits just right. She turns slowly, studying her reflection. “I look expensive.”

“That’s the idea.”

Away from the Jasmine and what it signifies, Ovuha is a chameleon. She wears the fine clothes, the haute-couture scarf, without doubt or effort. She belongs. In the train, among the crowd, down the thoroughfares and across the corkscrew bridges. The only tell is that Ovuha does not react to guidepost hubs at points of gravitational shift on the bridges; she wrong-foots, often, and laughs as she finds herself falling upward.

At the Selection Bureau, Ovuha is escorted into her preliminary session. Suzhen takes to a balcony, lighting one cigarette, snuffing it out, lighting another one. She tries to refrain from turning on the interview feed—she is entitled to—and after a third aborted cigarette, she gives up resisting. The channel comes on. Ovuha is seated alone in a room, surrounded by starless dark, some void far from the lights of Anatta’s satellites and helix-gates. The blackness covers nearly everything, swallowing up floor and ceiling and furniture, as if Ovuha is sitting on empty air. A voice as neutral as a guidance’s speaks. “What is the imperative that informs every human choice?”

“Conflict,” Ovuha says to the dark, “the basal urge. To fight or to

take flight: that is the binary which preoccupies the human intellect. No veneer of civilization may tame it, no eons of refinement may clean the dreams of blood, this hunger to see the inside of another person's guts."

"What is Samsara?"

"Limitless and true. The splendor that permeates. The custodian unmarred by desire or impulse."

Suzhen bites down on the dead cigarette. It tastes charred, papery. Her guidance notifies her of her heightened pulse and blood pressure. When it was her turn the room was merely sterile, done in the muted half-colors of grief and ennui. She was in that borderland between childhood and adulthood; her mother was dying, and in bureaucratic terms that meant it was time for her to test for citizenship of her own. Suzhen acquitted herself as best she could, by then used to reciting the right responses, the correct amount of conviction. Her gorge rises. She bends over the balcony, gripping the railing, and dry-heaves. In the void-shrouded room the interview goes on, and now comes the crucial response.

"Samsara is the anatomy of forgetting," Ovuha says. "Under its guidance we cast out the knowledge of main force and our animal instincts, our taste for devastation, our need to salt the ground and glass the earth. Samsara is the bulwark between us and the extinction we would bring upon ourselves. Beyond its gaze, entropy awaits. Outside its bounds, there lies only ruin."

All that eloquence, and perhaps—*What I want is a life where I make no enemies*—Ovuha even believes in it, the ideal refugee who seeks safety as well as ideological compatibility. How absurd. Suzhen wipes her mouth and composes herself. By the time Ovuha emerges, she is halfway through another cigarette, not aborted this time.

Ovuha looks wan from the exit decontamination, her system freshly cleansed of the trance drugs, her pupils dilated. She blinks blearily at the light. "How did I do? I don't remember much of what I said."

No question as to whether Suzhen observed, merely an assumed default. "You were entirely articulate."

"What a thing to say," Ovuha murmurs.

That a refugee can be eloquent, *articulate*, precise with words in Putonghua. "That's not what I meant."

"No. That is true. My apologies—I'm being unfair."

"The world is unfair," Suzhen says, and she could finish the thought—that the world has been unfair to Ovuha specifically, as it is unfair to those descended from exiles who forsook Samsara—but she refrains. Too mollifying, too apologetic, when she does not owe Ovuha that. "Do you feel up to job interviews or shall we call it a day? I've

already registered your certifications. You're technically equivalent to a citizen who's received ten years of basic education." An underestimate, but there is an upper limit for how far a candidate can be certified. Nothing tertiary, even when Ovuha's skills are well beyond that.

"It's remarkable that the possibility of me getting work is legal." The potentiate loosens her scarf and reties it into a complicated, rosette knot. "Truly Anatta's magnanimity is boundless. I'm up to it. I don't wish to be difficult."

"I should tell you that if your neighbors—or that family you're giving language lessons to—offer you help finding work, it's best to turn them down politely. Even if they insist it's better money than anything you can officially get." A market for refugee flesh; there is always one, always thriving.

"No one's offered, but I will keep that in mind."

Their first stop is at an ornithology lab, where bird cultivars are made to order. They wait in the showroom where sample birds sing in faultless harmony, preening, their plumage in every shade. There are openings for janitorial and menial work—the facility's run by someone who prefers human hands over drones—and at first Ovuha is received warmly enough, despite her status. The interviewer sours at one point and Suzhen, again monitoring at a distance, thinks she knows why. Ovuha's fineness, the absence of abjection. It is not that Ovuha is impolite, rather the opposite, but the interviewer expected a charity case, an object on which pity can be visited upon. Yet Ovuha resists both being an object and being pitiable. She should have left her potentiate in terrible clothes, Suzhen thinks, grimed and bare of cosmetics.

Next they visit a teahouse. Kitchen work, away from the view of diners. Here it goes even more poorly, the interviewer asking outright what Ovuha is doing here. "I'm in need of work," Ovuha says mildly; it earns her a request to leave.

Ovuha looks over her shoulder as they exit. "Perhaps I should've shown up in rags."

"It's only been two places." Suzhen consults her list and requests navigation from her guidance. "Be patient."

The third and fourth don't proceed much better. A citizen is evaluated and given a choice of assignments: none of this reliance on human caprices, the surface compassion that can turn into petty cruelty at the flip of a coin. Making the process the same for potentiates would have been far more efficient, more humane. Suzhen once asked her mother why. Mother folded her hands. *Samsara is intimately familiar with human nature. When life is otherwise perfectly manicured, precisely arranged by machine, you lose your agency. But if*

you cannot control your fate, still you can seek to control another's. In this way you may retain an illusion of power, of being master of your own life, and so continue to be complacent. And contented subjects are easy to govern.

What would happen, Suzhen wonders, when there are no more warlords and no more war-torn seekers of asylum; when the colonies have been disbanded or annexed under Samsara rule, humanity set on the path to paradise. All then would be citizens, all would be—in name—equal.

Before she sees Ovuha off, she says, "We'll get you employed before the month is out. No matter how tempting, don't take on work that sounds too good to be true."

"Such as being research subjects?"

"Someone did offer to help you then."

Ovuha half-chuckles. "I'm not a child, officer. When one's skills are not suitable, and few options are open, what remains but to sell the flesh? Organs, pharmaceutical and cybernetic testing, other things. It is not that any of them is lesser work. They fulfill a need. But I do have particular ideas on the autonomy of my body, even if I can't afford to. You needn't fear."

The things one can afford and the things one can't. When she is home, Suzhen double-checks the altar to her mother, to make sure the offerings she left have not faded into motes of dust.

Chapter Four

Being in a theater reminds Suzhen that she has not been in one for a long time or consumed any entertainment that requires in-person presence. It is small, exclusive, the kind of establishment that invites people like Taheen rather than people who work in bureaucracies. Taheen has come with her but has lingered at the reception and so Suzhen sits, alone, among the empty boxes that revolve slowly above the stage. Her friend encouraged her to mingle, but theirs is not company she enjoys. Even if Suzhen had tested into such fields, she doubts she'd belong with career artists, who universally have a particular temperament. The easy assumption that what they do matter the most: more significant, more brimful of meaning than clerical or administrative or menial work. The subsuming of identity and personality into passion.

Taheen arrives in their shared loge, wreathed in a cloud of cocktails and perfume. "I *finally* figured out how this new painter got a spot at Kufreabasi's gallery. Apparently zie slept with Kufreabasi while they were at this artists' retreat. So tawdry."

Suzhen has no idea who the painter or Kufreabasi is, or why Taheen should take an interest, given that they don't paint and neither person could possibly be competition. "You slept with plenty of people."

"Well sure, everyone does that, but you're supposed to be subtler about it when you're starting out. Besides, zie is an obvious sycophant and zir work's far too pandering. Painting about being a painter, art about being an artist, that sort of thing. I can't bear the type. Here, I got you a glass."

She takes the drink—more tea and fruit than alcohol, the way she likes it—and watches the light around them dim, the other boxes fill. "You still haven't told me what the play is about." She could have looked it up, but that would have made Taheen sulk, and in any case she prefers to hear it from them.

"Political allegory. No plot—literally, not just me being catty." Taheen empties their glass in a single gulp. "We aren't here for the quality of the script, you understand, just for the quality of acting. Vipada's the lead."

The auditorium deepens from white to the turquoise of sunlit sea, gold-green. Stimulated water laps and pushes against the glass of their loge. For a time—two solid minutes—nothing else happens save this gentle rocking motion and a few piano notes, muted and distant. The loges tilt backward, directing the audience's gazes to the ceiling.

From overhead a body is falling, facedown, limbs spread. The

descent is slow, resisted by the currents and the white funeral shawl that it wears. A woman with immense dark eyes, hair behind her like a comet, her expression glazed with the blankness of the dreaming or the dead. The ambience darkens, shedding the gold of daylight. “I am dead,” a voice says, “and I’m not awake.”

A second voice: “Perhaps you have never been.”

The body—the woman—stirs, shaking her head, righting herself in the water. She touches the shroud she wears, the soft material, and in distaste tears it off. Underneath she is not bare but armored, torso clad in red steel, limbs sheathed in shadow iron. “I am the Wayupuk, bird of war. Even in death I know no defeat.” Freed of the shroud, she sinks faster, feet first. She reaches into the deepening currents and draws from them a gun, the weapon phenomenally made, the black-pearl luster evident even in the dim.

Suzhen suspects she knows where this is going. But Vipada plays the part with sharp conviction, the warlord in the afterlife passing through her spiritual judges and inquisitors, remorseless even as she is pulled down to the ocean floor. “It is the human condition to be culpable in evil,” she says as the dark swallows her. “Great or small, the sole difference is the extent. Life is a slaughterhouse. You take charge of it or you’re swept away by it; you are the butcher or you are the meat.”

The irredeemable monster, admitting no regrets and making no apologies. Yet proud to the end. Perhaps intentional, perhaps not, though Suzhen expects it would have been more politic to portray the analogue for the Warlord of the Thorn with a less comely face, a more pathetic mien.

At the afterparty Taheen introduces her to Vipada, who alone of the cast has already shed cosmetics and costume, fresh-faced and incongruously mortal amidst a crowd of ghostly magistrates and afterlife demons. When she hears what Suzhen does for a living, she breaks into applause. “Thank goodness. I was going to throw up if I had to meet one more critic or really anyone who breathes *the arts*. The arts, even that sounds so nauseating, don’t you think? What a relief to see a person who lives in the real world.”

“Vipada is an artist who can’t stand other artists.” Taheen leans toward Suzhen, faux-conspiratorial. “*Especially* other actors.”

“Oh, Taheen, you can’t stand us either. Creatives excel at one thing and that’s being insufferable—if I have to hear *one more* writer claim they spin lies for a living! They think it’s such a charming joke instead of absolutely trite. If only my final evaluation had given me a choice of profession in accountancy or biochemistry…” Out of character Vipada is animated, expression mobile, hands moving fluidly as she talks. None of the cold solemnity of the dead general,

the sheer heft of presence. “Tell me about your work, please, Suzhen. Everyone in here wants to talk nothing else but the play.”

She’s caught off-guard; there is no script for being asked about her work as though someone is taking a genuine interest. “It’s fairly mundane.” The rapid desensitization to suffering, the numbing of procedure. “Most people would agree the things you do here are far more interesting. Ideas are potent. Carrying out regulations isn’t.”

“No, no. That’s the self-serving loftiness artists want to sell you. Ideas are fine. Ideas can affect. But *doing* is important—more important than thinking about it. Experience is what makes a person interesting, not ideas, and you must’ve accrued a stunning wealth.”

It is easy to be flattered, charmed. But as Suzhen speaks of Bureau work and attempts to make it sound exciting, she realizes that the actor *wants* to be thrilled. Vipada expects Suzhen to share the tragedies of those who enter and exit her office, their hard-won triumphs, their humility and simplicity. The lives of those born in a dominion of ruin. It is a safe thrill, a reminder that on Anatta deprivation is a remote concept, improbable and impermissible—as long as one is a citizen. Vipada may claim her heart bleeds for those in need but nevertheless she belongs to the norm, the default, and how much better it is to be so; how wondrous it is to haverather than to lack.

Suzhen finds herself almost speaking of Ovuha, that finely made, immensely educated potentiate. The one who would not have required entry to Anatta if her home had not been destroyed by the Peace Guard. The one who could be in this room and join the conversation as gracefully as any, whose bearing is as sophisticated as Vipada’s. She refrains. Ovuha is not a story or a character; she doesn’t exist as a vehicle through which Suzhen can deliver an argument. In the end, to shift the subject, she says, “You were very believable. The Wayupuk, bird of war.”

Vipada laughs. “Not my usual thing, but I try not to get typecast. Taheen—” She points; they have wandered off to hold court among a group of playwrights. “Taheen would tell you I tend to play flighty gods or devious ingénues—vixens, you know—and they aren’t wrong. So I was going to challenge myself. Getting into character for this one took incredible research. I watched interviews with refugees, read their biographies. For their perspective of the warlords, you understand.”

The perspective of being at gunpoint, tearing up images of revered symbols. The perspective of being made to fabricate miseries and terror under a warlord’s iron heel. And Suzhen would be the first to admit that not all warlords are benevolent with their own people, but—she tamps that down. Even indulging that line of thought will

make it express on her face, like pustules. There's so much she must keep to herself. "Was the character meant to be any particular figure or just an amalgam?"

"Ah, I'm not the author, but I expect the script's meant to be… topical. There were some last-minute changes to my character—" Vipada flutters her fingers. "But that's all backstage and the changes improved the play, if I may say so myself. They're such mysterious creatures, the warlords, I've always wondered how they can keep their faces and identities such perfect secrets. Maybe in a few years we'll uncover it all. True, they're monsters, but there's anthropological value to the culture, isn't there? The history, the mystique. It's surely worth studying once they're no longer a threat."

"It must be fascinating," Suzhen agrees, wondering whether Taheen has been exposed to this particular side of Vipada. Probably they have, and they would say Suzhen takes the actor's fetishism too seriously, that it doesn't matter. What matters is to seize the life she has, to thrive.

They continue to talk, and *Anthropological value, isn't there?* or not, Vipada is an easy conversationalist; the actor waves away her admirers, the few critics who've been allowed into the afterparty, and plies Suzhen with more tisane cocktails. "Let's meet again," she says before she departs to mingle.

On her part, Suzhen cannot imagine what Vipada could find of interest in her. But the actor is not unpleasant and Suzhen tells herself this is progress, this is a step out of her shell. She doesn't have to commit to anything. Taheen sees her off—she wants to tell them she'd rather have spent time with them but keeps that to herself. No point being their burden, latching onto them like a barnacle; she has been that long enough.

Compulsively she checks on Ovuha. The tracker points to a park several blocks from Gweilan Station. There are restrictions on how far Ovuha can travel, how long she can spend away from her housing or work, and so far Ovuha has complied without fail. A model candidate. Her supervisor Nattharat congratulated Suzhen on her first sponsorship going so well, but not before offering unsolicited advice. *Early days yet, my dear. Plenty of them behave for six months and the minute they're out of sight, they turn to drugs and petty theft. They sell their children. You can't trust them, honestly probation should go on for a year minimum. Six months don't tell you a thing.*

What are you here for, Suzhen wanted to ask, why are you in this line of work when you loathe them so desperately, when you think of them as less than animals. The Selection Bureau doesn't screen for empathy in its personnel: if it did, there would be maybe a dozen agents assigned per city, twenty at most. She turns back to Ovuha's

vital signs—all fine—and double-checks the alerts she's set in place. More than anything she's wanted to stay hands-off, granting Ovuha total privacy, but after the beating she's started to monitor risk indicators. Her potentiate will survive and gain citizenship, come hell or high water, Suzhen is determined in that much.

Against her better judgment—and against years of habit otherwise—she wends her way toward the section of Gweilan where new citizens live, not around the projects but the residential blocks for those who have achieved class theta. Achieved, she catches herself thinking that word, as though this is a status earned by merit and earnest labor. Not by precarious luck and a caseworker's caprices. Officially there is no demarcation between theta and prime, one can live wherever one wishes provided one meets the criteria: income, evaluation scores, criminal record. But those newly out of probationary residency have less of the first and the second, nearly always a blemish on the third. The potentiate's stipend is so vanishingly little and when one has nothing, *something* is worth any cost—even if it incurs a criminal record. The petty thefts Nattharat is so worried about, the ones that mean a difference between a good meal and pap.

She enters the kind of shop that she used to know well, where a little of everything may be found, cheaper than elsewhere. Dried foods heavy on starch, packets of synthetic flavoring, raw ingredients for communal meal fabricators. It is closer to rations on starved territories —the ones unclaimed by warlords and therefore fair game for all— than it is to food, but it stretches further than real meat. Diluted protean, thinned liquor, mass-produced academic uniforms that don't quite fit and would have to be altered at home. Hairpins, combs, soap that will clean well enough but smell of wax. Cheap animated one-use cosmetics, bits and bobs for repairing household appliances. A miscellany for those who lack, who can't afford any better, and who want to acquire what they can afford in one place because it is convenient and most days they don't have the energy to trawl a hundred boutiques. Suzhen browses the shelf of software modules: bootleg navigation and assistive algorithms, month-to-month access to entertainment. These niceties, excluded from a theta-class citizen's guidance, are manufactured scarcity even more so than the food.

The other shoppers give her wide berth, a reminder that she should've gone home to change before setting foot here. The clothes Taheen made her wear—their design, an affair of periwinkle-gray shards and ember fragments—give her away at a glance. A slumming voyeur, smelling of expensive theaters and debonair actors and absurd cocktails. She used to hate those misery tourists, the sight and scent of them filling her with rage; even young it was fully-formed rage and

she imagined their flesh bursting like ripe papaya, citizenship spilling out of them like rotten seeds.

She rubs her hands together, fingers tingling with nervous energy, with remembered anger. She meets no one's gaze as she exits, knowing she won't remember their faces; that like the Bureau has trained her to, she will abstract them to category tags and then forget about them entirely. *Citizen class theta, citizen class theta, citizen class theta.* She will not wish to recall them.

"You should not enter this area again, citizen," her guidance murmurs. "It causes you undue distress."

That one thing she misses from her time as probationary resident. The blessed, total silence. The freedom from this vapid nagging voice, this panoptic chaperoning presence.

Sunset strikes the roof. The arachno-floral hybrids are in a frenzy, their web thick and shivering. Nocturnal insects have emerged, moths and mosquitoes and fireflies. They swarm the flowerbed, a feast that serves itself, drawn by scent and sweetness and color. Ovuha watches and compares real insects to replicant ones, the actual to the artificial —she has always found real insects difficult to tolerate, faintly repulsive. The lymphatic fluids they hide, purulent despite the sleekness of carapace, of wings. She watches them fall into the web and sink, thrashing, trapped. There is a metaphor. She refrains from thinking on it; too obvious, too elementary, and she would be the bugs rather than the web.

She goes to the replicant cardinal, tending to it as she ever does. As yet, it hasn't yielded its secrets. She touches its flanks, looking for a feather that doesn't seat quite right, an activation mechanism. None has evinced so far, and knowing her predecessor—the one who set all this into motion—it would fall upon her to find the right phrase, the right code. Only she does not have the luxury to stand there and whisper scraps of poetry one after another until the correct one occurs, this chasing of a riddle whose shape she does not even recognize. And, always, she is watched.

Ovuha returns the replicant to its cage. Unnecessary, when all's said and done; it is not equipped with free will, an instinct for the skies, and will stay where it is put. The cage is salve to human insecurity. Birds belong in cages, that is the assumed default. A city crow flits by, basalt against the deepening blue, against the limned clouds. Perhaps it sees her, perhaps not. There is no telling which animal is true and which a replicant slaved to Samsara's awareness, eyes and ears for the vast intelligence. Even the ground on which she stands may collaborate. By all accounts, the AI controls every square centimeter of every city.

But even that is not impenetrable or infallible, and there are parts of Anatta sealed to Samsara's sight. This she knows for a fact.

The Luo children are emerging onto the rooftop. She counts two. The other two are absent today, the ones least interested in getting along with her, whatever their parents' instructions. Their parents, who were most likely paid and given passage in exchange for carrying out a small, specific task. Bringing this bird all the way and handing it to the person who offers to give their children language lessons. Ovuha was surprised they held up their end at all, but perhaps her presence—that she proved to be real—brings with it an implicit threat. A debt must be repaid, or else.

She asks them, in slow careful Putonghua, how they are coming along with their conversational language. "The important thing," she tells them, "is to pick up vocabulary through context clues. You don't need to understand the whole sentence, just three words—or even two—out of five."

"Good day, uncle," the youngest says. They're seven or ten, she judges, inexact; she is not good at children's ages, is far more accustomed to ones who are well-fed and well-provided for. Malnourishment makes them look younger than they are.

"Auntie," she corrects. It does not always matter, but to an Anatta native any linguistic error from a potentiate's child is cause enough to be petty, and maliciously so.

"Younger-sibling Natelia didn't come today." The child, whose name she never quite remembers, looks up at her with large eyes the color of faded radium. "Couldn't come. He was brought away yesterday."

This surprises Ovuha. Even the Bureau is usually not so remorseless as to separate a child from their family, as far as she's aware. Perhaps she is not aware enough, having not had to concern herself with such ancillary attachments. "To where?"

"To a new Papa and Mama." The child does not sound as though they entirely comprehend the concept. "They said we can visit and Natelia will have lots of sugar to eat."

Sweets, she presumes that means, a malapropism. "He was adopted out?" Some citizens are denied a parental license—Ovuha suspects the reason is psychological incompatibility, an aspect of character or personality that makes them unfit for child-rearing. But if they want to adopt a potentiate's offspring, the barrier might be lower, if at all extant. She tries to remember. Natelia is probably five, young enough for the new parents to see as malleable. One less mouth to feed for the Luo spouses.

"We can visit," the child insists.

Ovuha does not dispute—there is no point—and simply moves on

to a vocabulary quiz. By her judgment most of the children are as well-equipped as they can be, they will pick up Putonghua in time, they're young enough and their language centers still plastic. None of them received *in utero* cognitive stacks, cerebral links that would teach them language in the womb and enhance memory: Wyomere is not that kind of place. All things there are unregulated and the Luos were able to have as many offspring as they wanted. To poor results, she would judge, but such is not her business. Wyomere was a wild territory, outside the control of any warlord not because it was good at defending itself, but because it had nothing to offer. Sawdust and cinders.

The children, as one, pause in their reciting of a Putonghua rhyme. Around them, the Jasmine's other residents drop what they are doing, whether that is watering plants or handling laundry. Almost apologetically her students put their heads down before darting out of sight, down the staircase, evacuating the rooftop with the rest.

Very quickly she is alone, save for a deeply tattooed person advancing upon her.

They are openly armed, a coppery gun strapped to their hip, theatrically long in the barrel. The kind of firearm one uses on an armored vehicle or a large animal—Ovuha suspects its owner has given it a name. She can almost hear the tug and push of a passing crow's ciliary wires, or the whirr-click within the minuscule, sizzling brain of a moth trapped in the spider-flower web. Apparatuses through which Samsara may survey its domain, reading sight and sound, emissions and heat. In theory that means everyone is protected at all times, even non-citizens. In practice, she knows no Interior Defense will be dispatched, for the same reason that camp wardens are free to exercise petty tyranny on the bodies of their charges. Bodies without personhood are no more remarkable, and no more deserving of mercy, than a cut of chicken or a handful of offal.

Even so this thug, or whoever their master is, makes her curious: they are not Bureau or Interior Defense. Institutional cruelty is one thing. Privatized is quite another.

"You're new here," they say.

"I'm afraid so." She doesn't assay witticisms, something clever. Instead she looks them over, evaluating as they draw near and then stop a few paces from her. A threat on account of the gun, but also because they're wiry and move like someone who understands impact, understands the workings of human muscles and alimentary channels. Where to hurt to disable, where to inflict permanent damage.

The thug lights a cigar. The reek of it overwhelms the air. "It is dangerous to be without friends, Ovuha Sui. You may find yourself in want of things, in need even, of ways in or ways out. People need

people. United we stand…”

Ovuha is almost moved to smile at this cliché, at how meaningless it is, at the way it is uttered as a taunt. At the theatrics of this person’s tattoos, their elongated firearm. Every aspect is rote. “I would not mind friends. What do I have to do for friendship, stranger?”

“With information, stranger, or a fraction of your potentiate’s stipend.”

“I haven’t any information to offer, and a fraction of almost nothing is a small fraction indeed.” She spreads her hands. “At the present I don’t find myself pressed with any need, and so I’ll have to ask you to come some other time with this offer of friendship.”

The thug rushes her. She could foil the charge, it is easy enough: as they accelerate she can kick their knee, or she can grab an elbow, potentially break it. This is a combatant, but not one of any particular ability. But she has learned to take blows since she came to Anatta, has learned to accept and tolerate pain within reasonable bounds. She permits it to happen. They slam her into the wall—potted bonzais shudder; by luck the vases do not teeter and topple.

There is no blow forthcoming. Instead they’ve slapped something into her inner elbow, a jab of heat. The thug backs away, has—despite the routine—not even drawn their gun. “Don’t bother calling Interior Defense. This is a warning,” they say and turn on their heels, their business done. A gangly silhouette stalking off.

She stares after them, then at the dermal patch on her skin. Mottled gray, adhesive: it has drawn blood, has punctured with tiny needles, nearly painless. It does nothing at all, she feels only the faintest sting, less than the bite of an ant. In a few seconds heat overtakes her, total, and warps her entire limbic response. She staggers backward and a pot does fall this time, spilling twisted shrub and crystallized fertilizer and gray soil. Her back cracks against something hard. Her vision turns liquid, as though she’s viewing the world from deep undersea.

One of her implants quickens.

A contact toxin, but one that is also a puzzle for her—and only her—to solve. Strands of ancient math unfurl before her, roiling unkempt equations. Beneath them, a part of code. It is a game of memory more than anything, except the last time she saw the set was five years ago, maybe eight, and she lacks the array of mnemonics or recording that she once had. Her naked brain, for the most part, is the only aid and tool left to her. Any other she cannot yet make use.

She has fifteen seconds.

Flip the strands. Reverse the order of code. Match them to what she remembers. There is no confirmation whether she has done them

half correct or a quarter or none at all until the heat relents and the poison subsides. The reward is her continued breathing when otherwise she would have gone into anaphylaxis.

Ovuha draws herself up, peeling off the dermal patch. It has been spent, but she'll find a way to dispose of it later so that no trace will be left. Had she died here, all the rest would have died with her, unless her replacement has been trained in secret—secret even from her, a contingency for a contingency. That is possible, knowing her predecessor, a woman who liked schemes within schemes. Who liked to be absolutely, utterly sure, a habit Ovuha has inherited herself.

Best to act as though she is the last, all the same. No slack. No mistake.

She inhales the air, which still carries the stench of cigar, and in her head a map expands and pours. Information like a virus, which she will need time to detangle and absorb, make a part of herself. But from the shape of it, she is sure that what needs preparing has been prepared; the seeds have been planted, and now she must reap the harvest.

On her knees, she gathers up fragments of pottery and rubs the dry soil between her fingertips until it is fine powder. She glances at the sky. It is empty and growing dark. In her imagination, it is incandescent and subjugated, blotted out by golden ships.

Chapter Five

The dead of night, blackly quiet. Suzhen jerks awake from a dream of silence tolling like bells, a dream of her birthplace. It has not made an appearance in a long time. The halls that stretched on without end, the faceted roofs and nested windows that looked out to red, naked earth.

She reads the alert and swears through her teeth. As quickly as she can she puts on her clothes, sending out a call as she does. She's notified that first response has already been dispatched, and the nearest Interior Defense patrol will soon be about. *Soon* being subjective, from within the minute to within the hour. Anywhere else and they would have been onsite immediately, but the projects are disposable, the people in them even more so.

The Jasmine is in smoke when she arrives, plumes and strands of it spiraling through windows. First-response drones are extinguishing the fire, whirring through the building in sleek, silver schools. From the look of it, the combustion must have spread over an entire floor, the insulation barriers too ancient to keep it in check. Two floors, Suzhen corrects herself as her taxi lands. The roof is alight with emergency signals, marking the area off-limit to aerial traffic.

She finds Ovuha in the courtyard with the other residents. Most cluster together for comfort or shared resignation, standing guard over their belongings. Clothes, hard currency, first-aid kits. Jewelry and data cubes in clutched hands, the few pieces that have survived camp confiscation. Ovuha alone is without possessions, other than the portable strapped to her wrist.

"The fire started in my room," Ovuha says calmly. "I must apologize—I wasn't able to save the clothes you bought for me."

"In your room." The dying flames and emergency lights carve up Ovuha's face, giving it the look of cracked sculpture. Suzhen calls up diagnostics. First-degree burns along one arm. "How did it happen?" Her first thought veers inevitably to self-harm. The sudden guttering of will that can happen to anyone, any time, striking hard and fast as fire on human dermis. A cigarette burn here, a heated razor there. But the diagnostics reports that the injuries are fresh and the intensity of combustion too great, explosive.

"Someone broke into my room while I was out and took the first-aid kit, among others, anything valuable I'd guess. When I came back, the detonation went off. Timed or motion-triggered, hard to tell." Ovuha has dressed her arm in layers of gauze and she holds it away from her body. Her gaze is still on what remains of her room: the window is shattered. "According to my neighbors there was a power

outage just before; whoever did this made sure the surveillance would be off. The apartment's security is none too robust against tampering."

Said as though Ovuha has tried tampering with it herself, but Suzhen lets it lie. "Was it the boy who beat you up?"

"I doubt it. He and his wife lived too close, the explosion or the fire could have reached them. Someone might have believed I hoarded untold wealth in my room. Why the rest of it, I can't imagine. Perhaps I looked at someone wrong." But a flicker of expression tells Suzhen that Ovuha has a good idea who the perpetrator is or at least why they blew up her room. "Speaking of which, officer, do you notice you're the only caseworker here?"

It is not as if Suzhen could have failed to notice. Interior Defense still has not arrived, save for their drones. There are no human personnel on the ground other than herself and she's a civil servant, not a medic or Interior Defense. Her colleagues—some of whom must have the Jasmine's residents under their purview—are absent entirely. "They'll be here momentarily. I was likely the closest." She rubs at her eyes, exhaustion catching up. Two hours of sleep and she doubts she's getting any more tonight. Her temples ache. Her eyes hurt and her nose stings with grit and smoke. "You'll give your statement and then you're coming with me. I've put in a housing request, but the transfer won't happen until morning, if that."

"You're giving me a great deal of time and energy. I'm not sure what to say or do about that."

She doesn't answer and waits as Ovuha gives her statement to an Interior Defense drone, murmuring to its flat, featureless mask and staring into its gelatinous eyes. Public-facing drones could have been made in more humanoid image, but the only intelligence permitted anthropomorphic bodies is Samsara itself. The rest inhabit mannequin shells, boxy facades and porcelain carapaces, often insectoid and alien.

Once all residents have been rounded up for questioning—none missing, though a few are injured—and their statements recorded, Suzhen authenticates for custody rights to Ovuha, the way one might for an orphaned child or a pet, though Anatta treats both of those more kindly than it treats potentiates. Fortunately Ovuha is not detained as a suspect; the detonation timestamps itself and lines up with her statement, and though there's no footage of the saboteur there is footage of her leaving and returning to the complex. There is no record of her acquiring flammable material. From Interior Defense's perspective, there is still a possibility she set it all up herself, timing her absence, the power outage, and the explosion precisely. But for now, she's allowed to go.

Ovuha is quiet on the train ride. Under better lighting her burned arm is more obviously raw, swelling up translucent and yellow.

Second-degree then.

Suzhen hasn't brought painkillers or much of anything else. She settles on distraction. "What's Gurudah like?"

The look Ovuha gives her is edgy, startled. "There is not much to say." Her voice is slightly strained, her gaze glassy with pain.

"A tidally locked planet. That must be different."

"The day half too hot, the night half too cold. Neither fit for habitation. We had some agriculture down there, small patches; most of the time we lived in orbit. Gurudah has an atmosphere, though much shredded. There were seas. Superb to look at from afar, if devoid of life. We call the planet that, but the real Gurudah was the orbital; that was where people sank their roots, raised their families."

She lets Ovuha ramble on about hydroponics and the merit of gourds over root vegetables. From her telling Gurudah sounds sufficient, even comfortable. If she suffered hardship or deprivation in her former life Ovuha glosses over it, for much the same reason Suzhen would have. Making oneself an object of tragedy and pity is easy. Retaining dignity while doing so is not.

Outside Suzhen's apartment, Ovuha hesitates. "I must be the least hygienic thing to have ever entered your home."

"I've had drunk friends come in and throw up on my sofa. So no. Do you need to be shown how the shower works?"

Ovuha tentatively presses the gauze against her arm, but most of it is sliding off, drenched in lymph. "I shouldn't think so."

She makes chilled coffee as she waits. It's tempting to break out something alcoholic or light a cigarette, but she refrains. *Why am I doing this*. But she already knows the answer. More than being about Ovuha it is a proof of herself—that she can help even one candidate, lift them out of the muck of mandated misery. On the scale of Anatta at large, it doesn't mean anything, a single life, a single person. Nevertheless. And of course she chose a candidate with phenomenal odds, she wouldn't have sponsored the man who broke down in her office, the parents who came here with three children in tow, the starved teenager who could barely speak Putonghua. She selects and she discards; she is culpable. The human condition, like Vipada's character said.

Ovuha comes out in the robe Suzhen loaned her, another article of Taheen's largesse. Wasp taffeta, green-black, and a sash made of ceramic satin. On the potentiate it looks good, as good as it might look on a mannequin. The hem comes up slightly short, midway down Ovuha's long, muscled calves.

"It's a relief," Ovuha says as she joins Suzhen at the table. A school of particulate betta glides past her; a handful stay to swim circles, orbiting her. "Just to be genuinely clean again. One never

contemplates how hygiene connects to feeling like a person." She has already administered disinfectant and protean to her arm; the latter is hardening on the burned skin, milky like frosted glass.

Suzhen slides over a glass and pours coffee. "I've got painkillers." Protean numbs the area topically, but not for long.

"No. I'm fine. It's not that I like pain, but I prefer to keep a lucid head."

"Stoically bearing agony isn't necessarily a virtue. Medical care does exist for a reason." She has her guidance show her an inventory of her pantry. "Something to eat?"

"My thanks. But not at the moment."

They sit in quiet, sipping from their glasses. Suzhen watches Ovuha take in her apartment, gaze going from the ocean-lamps to the betta, to the neat, clean furniture, the tidy shelves and paneled doors. The width of the rooms, the structured comforts of a class-prime.

Ovuha's eyes linger, brief but noticeable, on the altar, on the image of Suzhen's mother. She does not ask or comment. Instead: "You must be absolutely exhausted. Don't let me keep you up, officer."

"You can have the sofa."

"I could as easily take the floor. It's terribly soft." Ovuha's mouth twists. "I'll try to take up as little space as possible. May I make you breakfast in the morning, or lunch if that's when you get up?"

Suzhen's first impulse is to say no. Having a stranger in her home is bad enough, an invasive presence; having one root through her spices and condiments is worse. "I wouldn't mind." She remembers having nothing. How every kindness felt like a burden of debt she must repay with haste, rare and few as it was. Doubly so because it was rare.

Coffee never does much to her and she falls asleep smoothly, nearly without transition between conscious and not. The dream continues where she left off, the palace with its beehive chambers, and her a child again. She is always a child in these memories, true to life, small and shod in bright, soft sandals. Beads around her neck, beads on her skirt, clattering with her movement. She loved to run, loved to explore the hall that was also her world. What felt like innumerable corridors, forking off into a hundred paths and a thousand doors, endless and full of possibility. She did not have much in the way of playmates; under the Mirror dominion childbirths were closely regulated. To be born was itself a privilege.

Suzhen was too young to understand that yet, too young to understand even that it was unusual for anyone to see the warlord unmasked, unarmored. A tall figure silhouetted by sun and dust, standing by a window, bending to her and chuckling at something she said.

In the dream, as in memory, the warlord asks her a question. *Do you want to see a jewel of a world? It is called Mahakala; even this name is a secret. That is what the Thorn governs, the seat of their power, a treasure Samsara itself would envy. A planet even more superb than ours, a planet of sapphire canopies and eternal dancers. The oceans, child. We'll taste its spray upon our skin, breathe in the brine and the salt, and make the depths yield their pearls.*

She wakes up to the taste of smoke in her nostrils, lingering at the back of her mouth, an admonishment that she never cleaned up before slipping into bed. Her guidance gives her an updated inventory of her pantry: what ingredients have been used and how much, down to the milligram. A risible thing to monitor; she dismisses it.

Dawn has molted away and the bettas have faded, replaced by their daytime counterpart, red butterflies that flit through the bugleweeds and begonias that now carpet the floor. Jasmine-rice steam overtakes the air. She follows its trail to the kitchen where Ovuha is dicing garlic by hand. "Good morning, officer. Is there any tableware I shouldn't touch?"

"I'm not particular, use anything you feel like. The fancy ones were all gifts." Taheen's again, occasionally coworkers' in the mix. Presents in the forms of cutlery and ceramics is an Anatta custom she's never understood, despite the decades. How a meal is eaten, how the food is presented, strikes her as beside the point. It is the taste and flavor that matter, not the ceremony or accoutrements.

Ovuha brings out a gold-laced glass plate where she's arranged rice in a crescent. Around it are sprigs of coriander, triangles of sliced ginger, cubes of pork fried in chili paste and shallots.

"You *are* good," Suzhen says, despite herself, eyeing the next dish —caramelized apples cut into rabbits, drizzled in honey and icing. She doesn't even remember having bought icing, though she probably tried to dabble in baking, in making herself and the rare visitor elaborate dishes. Before work sapped her time and energy, before it anesthetized all her interests.

"I enjoy cooking." But Ovuha's own portion is plainly done, placed in the most unassuming plate Suzhen owns, a flat rectangle of white china.

They eat in silence and it occurs to Suzhen that it's been a very long time since she had breakfast at home with anyone. Longer still that anyone cooked for her. Peculiarly intimate, and more pleasant than she'd like to admit. She abhors company but even then, even then there's the ridiculous human hunger for it, the social need. It is even possible to pretend that this is a meal between friends rather than what they are, the formality of authority, the imbalance of power between caseworker and potentiate.

Suzhen cleans her plates—the food tastes as good as it looks—and sets the domestic drone to take care of the cutlery and the kitchen, not that there's much to tidy up. She checks on the housing transfer and grimaces. The fire displaced nearly three hundred potentiates and, even though Ovuha isn't a suspect, Suzhen knows Ovuha has been deprioritized. Proximity to the incident and, though a victim, she has been marked as a magnet for trouble. Perfect behavior and perfect luck: the impossible standards to which a potentiate is held. Ovuha's sole option, presently, is to move back into House Penumbra.

"Do all citizens live as you do? If I may ask."

She blinks away the Bureau feed. The butterflies, in their random trajectories, have settled on Ovuha as though she is sweetly fragranced and nectar-rich. Red-on-red wings mantle her shoulders, gold antennae glimmering along her throat, made brighter by the dark of wasp silk. The faultless arrangement of a portrait, brought to life. "Alone? Obviously not. Ah. You meant—no." The question so fraught, and so calmly put forward. Do all citizens live like this, are all citizens as supremely comfortable. She could evade by saying many live better than she, creatures of wealth and opulence who own mansions surrounded by orchards or decorative vineyards. She could simply say, *Your definition of basic necessities and mine are not the same*. It would be true. "Samsara provides."

"Truly it does. And those who did not stray reap their just fruits, grown full and fecund from the seeds of faith. The rewards for those who saw and comprehended the truth of paradise from the moment of its revelation."

Samsara is not religion but it is a doctrine, and the fluency with which Ovuha speaks the apocrypha is jarring. But it does not surprise. "It probably wasn't an easy decision at the time, an easy thing to believe in." Humanity's cradle rent by war, the sky tenebrous with armageddon, the seas made poison and the continents made soot. And then, the choice. To stay and enter a frozen sleep while Samsara healed the world, or to leave on an exploration fleet in search of another habitable planet. Many chose exodus, but they—Suzhen's forebears, the warlords' forbears—never found one. In all the universe, the infinite dark, not a single world would naturally admit human presence. There was no second chance, only makeshift possibilities. The sealed biodomes, the orbitals, the city-ships.

It was not until later, after Samsara had woken up its human charges, that it laid down the rules of its governance. The might and the mercy, the fetters that must be placed upon the human instinct for annihilation. Anatta's first citizens, newly roused and thawing and weak, were no doubt docile. Easy to mold into ideal subjects, easier once Samsara found a cause to unite them against: the ones who left

Anatta and went astray. The ones who abandoned them to slumber beneath the ground and so must be punished, the sin inherited all the way down their lines of descent.

Suzhen likes to picture it, cryogenic pods opening all at once, in their dozens or scores or hundreds. People spilling out, boneless and gray and terrified, and Samsara standing over them in an avatar larger than life. Three meters tall, a creature of acute angles and a face like the edge of a fine, fine razor.

The human factor—the means to control, the object instruments and lessons—in the AI's rule is not difficult to puzzle out, has never been.

A slower day than usual at the office, and genocide on the broadcasts. Suzhen has been a week away and comes back to find the lobby empty when she expected to see it dense, bursting at the seams. The reason for this lack reveals itself in footage of orbital combat, stations shredded and biodomes bombarded. At a distance, so no blood and pulped bodies would mar the sight. Enough destruction to satiate the spectator's appetite without offending delicate tastes. There will be underground clips, covertly released and semi-legal. Those will have the gore, the viscera, the body count. Every palate will get its satisfaction. Evidently the Thorn's remaining lieutenants did not surrender, but neither did the Peace Guard spare civilian populations in outposts belonging to the Thorn. Corpses cannot come to seek refuge on Anatta and take up resources. It is one way to simplify the Bureau's work.

Nattharat catches her in the cafeteria, taking a seat so she can block Suzhen's exit from the booth. "Is it true you've put your potentiate in your home?"

Suzhen counts her options. To pretend deafness. To feign abrupt bowel distress. The possibilities, as they say, are infinite. Not that she was hoping to keep it a secret; Ovuha's place of residence must, of necessity, be entered into the system. "I'm letting her stay on a temporary basis. This isn't against regulations, I understand."

"Oh, no. It *is* terribly charitable to do. Your first sponsorship can feel so intense, it's easy to get attached and feel like your potentiate is a victim in need of rescue. But your actual home, my dear? She might steal from you, let in unsavory types, get up to any number of illegal things. So many risks! She's used to living lean, Suzhen darling, it's no ordeal to let her return to Penumbra for a few weeks. You can resume orienting her after."

The sterile, compressed cells. The soundproof walls. The isolation wards. Suzhen has had a lifetime of being condescended to, but she has never felt as viscerally nauseated as when Nattharat calls her

darling. “I appreciate your advice, Supervisor.”

“Good. Even the *model* candidates. And they’re so pitiable, aren’t they, so stricken and deprived, your heart bleeds for them… still, you’ve got to take precautions. Wasn’t her colony in thrall to the Thorn?”

“Formerly. By the time she left it’d fallen to the Comet. Those things change hands regularly.” Suzhen pushes her food around in its bowl. The cafeteria fare is more than adequate—sometimes it is even good—but she discovers that she no longer has any appetite. She thinks of Ovuha’s cooking, its urbane composition on the plate. “I do keep a very careful eye on Ovuha Sui.”

Nattharat laughs, jangling, high-pitched. The screeching of a bird excited by prey. “I’m hardly faulting your work, dear. Just be careful. I’ve had *them* try to rob me, you know how it is. Enjoy your lunch, don’t let me keep you.”

Her appetite doesn’t return in Nattharat’s absence. It is not even that her supervisor is malicious, monstrous. Merely she is banal, the way most citizens are banal. Refugees are anthropological curiosities, charity projects, or they are thieving vermin.

Suzhen turns to the employment registry. It is, theoretically speaking, extensive: planetwide there is a wealth of possibilities for the potentiate in need of work. In practice the possibilities are closer to poverty. It is not improbable that, given enough time and willingness to try every single city on Anatta, there will be something for Ovuha. But not here, not now when the Thorn is so freshly vanquished and Ovuha’s history—a subject of the Thorn, however many years ago—is upon her like a brand.

A potentiate has eighteen months to attain citizenship, one criterion being employment or academic enrollment. No safety net exists. Workplaces and schools have no legal obligations, no potentiate quota to fulfill.

Whatever her alienation toward Taheen’s circles, she knows her friend’s tastes. She calls them and asks if they would like to have dinner at her home, promising an aesthetic surprise. More than this she does not give away, and it intrigues Taheen enough that they accept the invitation. Then she calls home. “Ovuha. Would you mind cooking for three this evening? Thank you. No, anything will do, I leave it to you; I trust your palate implicitly. My friend will be coming at eight, someone who might be able to get you work. I wouldn’t ask you otherwise, you aren’t a house drone. I’ll be back early.” Nevertheless she still feels, afterward, as though she’s treating Ovuha as a domestic helper, a servant. She goes through what she owns, arranges a particular set of clothes—all of Taheen’s making—and sends them to Ovuha, with instructions on the more exotic parts. The

dagger cuffs, the deconstructed collars, the heron-rib jewelry.

She does receive a candidate toward day's end, a tattered-looking person, their face and arms mottled with scars. "I've been here before," they say in thick but fluent Putonghua, "I've been out there. This is my second time."

So it is. This candidate has been through the probation period before, has been registered as a potentiate. The full eighteen months, but they failed to secure citizenship and so were sent back to the camps. Most remain there indefinitely, transported from one camp to another, to off-world detention facilities and sometimes eventually cast out of Anatta. The candidate states this fact, *my second time*, as though it will augment their chances; as though it will sway Suzhen in their favor. "Your file says you're from Gurudah." Though departed much sooner than Ovuha did: years between them. "This isn't anything to do with your candidacy, but do you know an Ovuha?"

Their expression flickers, indecisive—will this question help or hinder, will their answer give them another residency, a way out of the camps. "Absolutely," they say. "We were excellent friends, if it's the Ovuha I'm thinking of."

It is a lie, the feed notifies her, not that she can't tell. To say anything, to grasp at any frayed thread, the slightest hint of hope. Half a plank of wood in a raging ocean. Suzhen entertains the candidate for a time, and in the end lets them know that she'll prioritize them for the next month. "I would like to see you here again." A meaningless thing to say. "I'll make sure you have another chance, as much as I'm able to."

They look at her, neither dejected nor furious, calm in meeting the result they anticipated all along. "Yes, all of you say that."

It is not untrue. False hope and lies, those are the things the Bureau trains agents to offer up as though they are gems and currency, as though they are the most precious of gifts. Poison dripping from her fingers, seeping into candidates' skin. One by one she is complicit in murder.

An hour later, she is off work, bound for a funeral. A mentor of hers who retired from the Bureau eight years ago, a man in his seventies, far from sunset yet. By the grace of Samsara, most citizens can live to see two hundred or two hundred fifty. But he has chosen to die, despite calibrating sessions, despite the comfortable life and what is—by all accounts—a good marriage with his wife and husband. Suzhen talks to the husband at the proceedings, who grieves in the way of someone who's been grieving for months, a grief that has become chronic. "This is what he wanted, you understand." The widower dabs at his face. "He wouldn't let the thought go. The idea."

The wife stares on, dry-eyed, at the cremation tube suspended

from the ceiling. Glass window and smokeless fire slowly incinerating a body that has already been made unrecognizable—all papery flesh and bone shards. Innards and unseemly parts have been removed to burn separately. Two monks in red and saffron preside, giving blessings, scattering a fine spray of consecrated water on mourners.

"I'm sorry," she offers, uselessly. "He was so kind to me when I got started. I didn't know he was planning for an early termination." Seventy, young for those born class prime. Old for someone who were not; old for someone like her mother. On Vaisravana, Xinfei would have lived longer than a century—the Warlord of the Mirror was over ninety, the height of health and virility, by the time she sent Xinfei and Suzhen away.

"He's talked about it for years." This from the wife. "There wasn't anything wrong with him, his psychological profile was perfect; he barely needed the calibrations. But he felt old inside. That his time was done. That more days were pointless because nothing changes, nothing is new. As if we weren't enough, the two of us, the three of us. I don't think I will ever forgive him."

Above the cremation tube, an image of him regards the funeral, mouth moving soundlessly.

To be inside Suzhen's home is much like being inside a book. Not its substance or style, the prose and ligaments that create its matter; rather it is like peering into the process of its making—the way pages are bound and cover embossed, how the spine is soldered to bear cohesion's weight. Ovuha disturbs nothing, opens no door to which she has not been invited—she is no thief, not of objects or a person's privacy. But merely inhabiting this physical space tells her any number of things about its owner. How Suzhen arranges her home and therefore views the world; how she sorts her belongings, how she moves in a space that belongs to her alone, how her tastes run.

What Ovuha gleans is not quite what she expected.

Prior to now, she assumed the charity was selfish, superficial, the brittle act of someone with something to prove. Now she gets the sense that she's misjudged, for there is an impression of temporariness to Suzhen's apartment. What is ostentatious and elaborate has all, Ovuha is certain, been gifts: the ceramics, the silverware, the decorative frames. They clash too much with the rest of the decor and belongings to be Suzhen's own purchases. The majority of her wardrobe is tasteful but much plainer than the sculpted scarf, the silk robe—an eye for function first, for efficiency, in cost as well as in design. Nothing sentimental decorates the place, as far as Ovuha can judge, excepting the altar. Suzhen doesn't regard this place a home so much as an in-between, a makeshift that she may any moment have to

abandon.

Ovuha has seen this treatment of home as transient—unstable and therefore not home at all—among three categories of people: soldiers, spies, and refugees.

On her part she keeps to the parlor, makes the couch as much of a living space as she can, circumscribed and small. Simple enough when she has little to begin with. She does not intrude on the rest of the apartment, does not touch any furniture or cutlery, any area that is not explicitly permitted to her. When she is satisfied that she has left no mark—that traces of her presence give nothing away about her disposition or preferences—she leaves the apartment.

Hers is a long leash. She can leave not only Suzhen's place but the residential complex itself, a broad building that from the outside appears like miniature landscapes layered onto each other: forested glades, faceted topiaries, orchards of glittering fruits and ivory brush. Each immense floor is occupied by no more than three or four residents, mostly without family. Anatta is a world of excess, of inexhaustible bounty. Anything may be had, as long as it is not a request to be free of Samsara's silken order, to be outside the reach of its velvet palm.

Ovuha doesn't try the trains or any other public transport; she would be especially surveilled there, and her status would be flagged to Interior Defense or Bureau officials. Any of them could detain and question her on a whim because she is breathing, because her gait displeases them, because to them she is effluvium. She ranges around the residential complex's immediate vicinity, noting as she does the foot traffic, the type of crowds. The district is low in population, but most citizens' districts are, a world where people are spread out. Easier to control, she surmises, segregated by citizen classes and also by political opinions.

Opinions—not that she's seen citizens express any, but she has been limited in her exposure. To her they are uniform, self-satisfied and frictionless, as fundamentally empty as marionettes: hollowed out by comforts, by not having to think or choose save in the most trivial of manners. Suzhen is a rare exception. Or perhaps Ovuha has been seduced by what is merely human regard—but now is not the time to consider her personal feelings, her emotional reactions. In the grand cartography of things, Suzhen is beside the point.

According to the map that she extracted from the contact toxin, the network nodes she needs are in Indriya and Himmapan. Ones she will need to get physically proximate to verify the existence of, though she will not be able to activate them until she has all the requisite keys. And until the time is right.

Ovuha walks, outwardly aimless, testing the extent of her leash

still. When no warning flashes on her portable and no shock emanates from her tracker, she ventures further, and then further again. It is true that Samsara is limitless, omniscient. But even an AI like that cannot monitor everything, split the filaments of its mind infinitely: a compromise must be made, and unless a potentiate or citizen is demonstrating aberrational behavior, there is no reason for it to pay heed.

By the district's very edge, her implant reacts. Subroutines for basic detection rouse, finding their twin, their match. The spot, from the surface, bears no special marker: it is just another segment of footbridge, gleaming stone and a view of filigreed river. Like so much else it is contingency upon contingency, and the node's placement must have been done decades ago, probably before she was born. An act hidden from Samsara, achieved by an agent that was able to infiltrate civil engineering, or someone even further back in time. She doesn't stand there, doesn't pause to appreciate this sign of success. Simply she walks on, betraying no reaction.

There's the question of her contact here, the one who arranged the attack that contained a map—but that knowledge wasn't passed to her precisely because it risks the entire enterprise. She's been conditioned against interrogation but that is no guarantee, and what she does not know cannot be tortured out of her. So she must work blindfolded, as fumbling as any moth caught in the web and the old warlord a spider manipulating the universe from beyond the grave. A woman whose heart was a tireless engine and who forged Ovuha's to be the same. The woman who found within the endless ranks of the Peace Guard a weakness, an opening through which Anatta may be struck and pried apart.

She looks down at her wrist, where the thornworks sigil used to abide and mark her as successor to the office: a necessity when the title came with a mask and usurpers were not unheard of. Erased since, for she does not require it here. Her fingers twitch—her datasphere used to have a tactile element that she could interface with her hands; the Anatta standard sports none at all. It would be a tell.

People pass her by, making no comment, sparing her no second glance. She spends a little time observing them, trying to envisage for them an interiority, knowing as she does it is a failure of her own imagination that she cannot. A group of clerks on break—workplaces shift their breaks a few hours apart so the trains never get overcrowded. They chatter about a new spectator sport, a mix of obstacle course and unarmed combat, done in person and with the flesh rather than in virtuality. They discuss their bets, the rising stars and the sure losers. Ovuha frowns and immediately smooths out her expression. It sounds like bloodier display than she would expect on

Anatta, but perhaps that is another outlet, another part of the process by which Samsara controls the human taste for violence. That animal thirst, which in local doctrines is intrinsic, and which must be caged and corrected.

On her way back to Suzhen's home, she stops at a street market and tries to purchase fruits. This is denied—her account, it appears, has been locked against any transaction at all. The proprietor already has an eyebrow raised to see her use a portable rather than datasphere, and when she is unable to pay he asks if he should call the Bureau or Interior Defense. Odd to offer her a choice at all, but maybe he thinks it is the kindest he can be. She gives him a little bow before apologizing and leaving his stall. His eyes follow her, as do those of his employees and his customers. She has experienced much worse humiliation since her arrival here, but she can imagine this being the one that undoes a person, the last straw on dignity's brittle back.

The day grows warm. She takes shelter near a tearoom: observes for a time the motion of clinking cups and saucers, the sedate progress of tiered stands from kitchen to table. Every plate is piled high with small cakes dusted with coffee and raisins, multi-colored discs made from sugar and albumen, cups of puddings and mousse. Waiters wear corsets of exoskeleton and mirror shards, wide hooped skirts done in organza and scrimshaw. The place appears to be reproducing the style of a long-lost civilization—not any one aspect or era, but the entirety at once. The tearoom is built with a high ceiling, vaulted and painted with murals of white-robed beings with dove wings, and the street-facing windows are partly stained. Bright primary colors, images of apples and naked women wrapped in coiling snakes. Peculiar iconography spills out the door, froths of steel and copper lace and crucifixes nestling between them, the sort some people from Wyomere wear.

Someone steps behind Ovuha. Remains there, not moving on.

Once she would have availed herself of personal sensors that would have given her an image of this person from every relevant angle, collected every necessary point of data in an instant. How tall they are, how heavy, what signals they emit if any, whether they wear combat augments. An olfactory analysis to guess whether they smoke or partake of drugs—to enhance physique and block pain, to alter pheromones—and make that judgment with a margin of error so small it is expressed as a vanishing decimal point. She would not need to look at them with flesh eyes to assess threat. The world was at her fingertips, the orbits of stars hers to shift and rearrange.

This person is not the thug that accosted her on the Jasmine's rooftop. They are rounder and paler, without much in way of tattoos —just a smattering of animated dermals on their forearms, a school of

ribbon-fish. “Ovuha Sui, I believe,” they say, raising their eyes to meet hers. They have to crane their neck, being small: a hundred sixty to Ovuha’s hundred ninety-eight. “I don’t believe you have found employment. You must worry your caseworker to death.”

“I’m sure I do. It is not an ideal state. I don’t believe we’ve met?”

“I represent the interest of someone who wishes to see every potentiate pursuing gainful paths.”

“Yes,” Ovuha says slowly, “I have heard of those paths. I’m afraid my body is not for sale.”

The person dimples. Their ribbon-fish thrash, as though stranded on dry land. “It is nothing like that, friend. There is demand for… therapy where the *client’s* body is the one that receives treatment. Do you understand?”

She does not ask why such clients want potentiates in particular for this. People have a hundred thousand varied urges. “An unusual proposition. What happens if I damage the client, which seems inevitable and rather part of the idea? Won’t Interior Defense instantly materialize and shoot me in the head?”

“Assuredly not. As you say, inflicting hurt in controlled ways is the point. Anything done during the session is exempt from assault or battery clauses, as long as it falls under the terms you and the client have negotiated, and does not cause injury above a certain grade.”

“And,” Ovuha says, “why me?”

“It is a specific need. The client requested a person of, ah yes, brutal beauty and masterly disposition. Such criteria are difficult to fulfill when one’s talent pool comprises of potentiates. They tend to be a little too beaten down for the role.”

“Brutal beauty,” she repeats, dry.

The intermediary beams again. A cluster of ribbon-fish spill down their elbow, scrambling for purchase. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say your face came out of a catalogue. Which it might well be, no shame in that, though the surgery must’ve drained the coffers of a wasteland world or two. Best to make use of it, don’t you think? But you know that already.”

Perhaps it is idle speculation. Perhaps it is precisely said, these taunts. The person who sent her the neurotoxin map—the Anatta contact with whom her predecessor sealed a covenant—almost certainly sent this intermediary. The Jasmine arson might well have been arranged to mask the act of reaching out to Ovuha. “I’m in no place to choose,” she says.

“Thank you—I’ll get a handsome commission from it. You’ll know the client when they approach you, I’ll seed your portable with an alert.” They give her a little wave. “Perform well, Ovuha Sui. Keep it up and we’ll both grow richer from it.”

Suzhen comes home to Ovuha in the kitchen sculpting fruits and vegetables. A melon swan, preening, its body hollowed to hold strawberries and gandarias carved into tiny roses. “I tried to buy groceries,” she is saying when Suzhen enters, “but I discovered that I can’t make any transaction without your authorization; evidently I’m legally considered your dependent the same way a child is.”

“I forgot about that.” Suzhen watches the glint of chisel in Ovuha’s hand, small and sharp, fast-moving. Hypnotic. The domestic drone must have done some of the work, but even so this is impressive. “Is there anything you need? Spices, condiments I don’t have? I’ll order it in.”

“No, I just wanted to do my part.” Ovuha flicks a sliver of fruit into a waiting bowl; the entire kitchen is absurdly pristine given the work. Cutting boards lightly wet, a tray of soup dumplings—the skin in black, green, red—prepared for the steamer. Honeyed pork, glistening and succulent, awaiting the knife. “How was your day?”

“I went to a funeral. We used to be colleagues.”

“My condolences.”

“We weren’t close. He trained me at the Bureau, and he was mindful enough.” Not empathetic but not cruel. Indifference is the best one can hope for in a selection agent. “Last week, he chose to pass on. His wife and husband were devastated. As far as they knew, he wasn’t troubled by anything.”

“Occasionally people want to stop. That should be respected.” Ovuha continues whittling the piece of carrot in her hand. A pagoda half-done, windows carved out, the roofs unformed. “Samsara’s grace could be too much, do you think? When one has total comfort and freedom in some matters, yet is utterly restricted in others, the glory of paradise may turn to dross. But I didn’t know him and I’m speculating, which hardly seems proper, and I’m being too idle.”

“As for that, about the job.” Suzhen finds herself brusquer than she meant to be—the subject has gotten too personal. “My friend is Taheen Sahl. They’re a couturier; a lot of my clothes were presents from them, though they complain I don’t wear them properly. They’re always on the lookout for models.”

“Are there not mannequins for that?”

“Taheen prefers drones for assistants, people for models. Cleaner work and better inspiration, apparently.” Suzhen tries for circumspect, euphemistic. Decides that blunt is more efficient. “You’ll catch their eye—I know their preferences—and they’ll ask you to work with them. They may compliment your looks. But they won’t make advances that aren’t welcome. They won’t abuse their position, and if they do in the slightest, you will let me know.”

“This is frank. And them being your friend.” The look Ovuha gives her is sidelong, appraising.

“They’re excellent to me—one of the best people in my life. I love them dearly.” Too revealing. “That doesn’t mean they’ll be excellent to everyone. Speaking of frank, why did someone try to burn your room down? The real reason.”

A low laugh. Ovuha returns to her pagoda, its intricate eaves, the nascent finial she is filing down to a tapered point. “I’d thought we were past that. There was no evidence, circumstantial or otherwise, so I thought saying anything on record would bring me no benefit. Does it truly make a difference?”

“It doesn’t. I still have to know.”

“After I got beaten up, I was approached by a well-armed person who notified me that as a tenant in that building, I was vulnerable to any number of dangers. Petty theft, violence, mugging. All I had to do was to pay a small monthly fee and their colleagues would look out for me.” She puts down the pagoda, finished now, polished and chiseled to incredible detail. “People make hierarchies wherever they go, even in the smallest place possible. As a new variable I must be placed somewhere within this hierarchy and, scenting weakness, they determined that I belonged at the bottom.”

“You did not report this.”

“I’m sure I could have reported it as a misdemeanor, but that was no evidence this thug was the culprit. When it’s all been investigated, I’m sure they will find no hint as to the arsonist’s identity either.” Ovuha glides over to the steamer, checking the temperature, and puts in the tray of soup dumplings. “What colors do you like best? I went with the classic ones, but if you’d like them in blue or purple next time…”

“Ovuha,” Suzhen says.

“Yes, officer?” Ovuha’s expression is bland, even amused. “It’s just that I couldn’t take them very seriously. The menacing insinuations. The way that thug was tattooed so extravagantly. The suggestion they had friends in Interior Defense who’d overlook anything they did, though I’m sure that part’s not untrue. But it was all so uninspired.”

Suzhen is quiet for a moment. It occurs to her that what Ovuha owns may not be simple pride but stunning arrogance. The certainty that this—the methodical disassembling of personhood and origin, the systematic degradation of the self—is beneath her, that those who participate in it are so contemptible they do not register to Ovuha as real threats. “Even if you thought they were petty and ridiculous, the damage they inflicted was real. The burns on your arms are real.”

“They are. I could have died. It’s not that I’m nihilistic or fearless.” Ovuha adjusts the steamer’s heat and regards the rest of her

dishes with a critical frown. Then she meets Suzhen's eyes. "On Gurudah, I did not live without danger. We were lined up by the Comet's soldiers and told at gunpoint to swear fealty. Such experiences inure you. All terror is real but some is realer than the rest. One desensitizes, and the mind defends itself in flawed ways."

Heartrate normal, cortisol normal. Ovuha is displaying not even a single stress sign: this is discussed much as she would recount how she selected the best vegetable for her hydroponic orchard. "And what did you do, when you were held at gunpoint." By Peace Guard infantry, by the Comet's soldiers. Suzhen does not specify.

"I survived," Ovuha says.

Taheen comes in their best, a sable-ice cocktail dress: long stalactite sleeves, the front a web of crisscrossed spicules, skin from the nape of their neck to base of their spine bare and dark. Snowflake lenses cover their eyes, bright dermal dots spread like a constellation between their breasts. When Ovuha appears to serve the food, Taheen takes on that look Suzhen knows well from having watched them flirt, pursue, and convince a beautiful stranger to join them in bed. (It is not a look they've ever applied to her, but what of that, she is at peace.)

"You *are* going to sit down and eat with us?" they say to Ovuha. "Do say yes."

Ovuha gives Suzhen a quick, wry glance before making a gallant, foreign bow. From the waist, hand on her heart. "I'm pleased to say yes."

Taheen is expansive in their conversation, effusive in their praise of Ovuha's cooking without sounding false. They do not speak of current events—the vanquishing of warlords, the bombardment of Thorn territories—and instead let Ovuha take the lead. It is the first time Suzhen has seen Taheen take such interest in the ideal size of a chicken coop, which root vegetable is most suited for sculpting, or the merits of beef compared to pork stock in soup dumpling. Between all this, they send Suzhen a datasphere message. *I'm going to ask her to work for me, just as you plotted, you sly fox. Are you sure you're all right with it, though?*

Suzhen eats her last dumpling, the skin ruby and precisely pleated, the insides deeply flavored. Exactly the right amount of sesame oil. *She needs a job.*

I mean that she'll meet people, and unless I'm very wrong she is going to be in demand—though I intend to be the pioneer, the one who discovered, naturally. My point is, she'll become independent. And I think you're a caregiver, someone who needs a broken bird to nourish. I've never seen you this interested *in anything or anyone.*

The world of artists, where all must signify more profoundly than

it seems, where every interpersonal tie is a dysfunctional affair waiting to happen, each component of the everyday a psychosomatic symptom. And perhaps it is, with her and Taheen, with whatever lies between them. Not with her and Ovuha. *I don't have a power fetish, Taheen. She is a project. I'm doing the labor for which the state pays me.* "Ovuha, the honeyed pork's especially good. Taheen might want the recipe, if you don't mind sharing your culinary secrets."

Ovuha looks from her to Taheen. "But naturally. I'd be happy to. It's a boon to meet someone else interested in cooking."

"Speaking of interest," Taheen says brightly, "what do you think of fashion, Ovuha?"

"Like anyone else, I enjoy beautiful things." Ovuha touches her disarticulated collar; its joints click, a short tune. "The clothes Suzhen kindly lent me are especially bewitching. They're almost more like a painting than something to wear. This makes me the canvas, perhaps, or at best the frame."

"Oh, clothes that aren't being worn are—quite literally—two-dimensional, just fabric. It's the wearer that completes the art." They lean forward. "How would you like to work with me and put on all these beautiful things?"

Chapter Six

When Ovuha gazes into a mirror, what looks back is a stranger, a fact to which she has become inured. Still, the images of her that spread around Taheen's gallery like scattered cards unsettle her slightly, an alienating, dissociative effect. Her doppelgangers strut, sashay, pose. Taheen is asking which form she likes best and adds, "Then you'll have to practice that walk, that style. Atam will show you."

Her fellow model, who has been studying her closely, not looking away even when Ovuha notices. A frank stare. It does not seem hostile, but it is also too intense for a newly met coworker. Appraising her for competition, possibly, though Taheen surely has a stable of models larger than two. "You're giving me a great deal of leeway," she says.

"Obviously. Making my models take on posture they don't like or comportment that goes against their nature comes to stilted result. Although," they add, "it helps that your posture is so supple. Not much that needs correcting, very trainable."

Atam disappears to fetch more fabric samples and swatches at Taheen's instruction. Ovuha studies her own images in the mirrors, these animated models of her, fast-moving and long-limbed. The limbs and torso belong to her and only the face is foreign, yet it is the face one focuses on. "You and Suzhen must have been friends for a long time." The face, Ovuha thinks. Something about Taheen's features trips a wire between the sheaves of her recollection, but without access to the implants she once had, she only has her own memory to rely on and that is not always a dependable quantity. "You wouldn't have hired me if you didn't regard her highly, whatever my posture."

"Prying," they say. "I regard her very well. I imagine she doesn't tell you good things about me, though. Says I'm quite a character, no?"

"No, actually. She says she loves you dearly and that you're one of the best people in her life."

Taheen Sahl's expression tightens, as though in pain. Then they snort and the insouciance snaps back in place. "Hmph. How are you finding cohabitation with her?"

Ovuha wonders if she's stepped into a romantic spat, though at the dinner she never got the sense—quite—that they are lovers. "She's the most conscientious, attentive caseworker I could hope for, and she seems to enjoy my cooking."

They snort again. "A safe answer. Well, as long as you don't trouble her. Atam, there you are. I'll leave her to your tutelage."

The other model brings the fabric swatches, holding them against Ovuha. In their employer's absence, Atam continues to stare at Ovuha, even more openly than before. Xie is her physical opposite, short and voluptuous, xer hair a cotton-candy gradient and xer skin a deep, gleaming bronze. "Is it true that you're from the colonies?"

Ovuha smiles, noncommittal. "If I say no you wouldn't believe it. This leaves me with limited options."

A pause. "I don't mean anything by it. You speak better Putonghua than most of us. What would you like to know about working for Taheen? They're a good boss. Far more flexible than most. You and I are pretty lucky, considering the industry."

The industry, as if Ovuha might have experience with or an opinion of it, though she appreciates the inclusion, the effort to commiserate. "What do we do generally?"

"Well, they're an independent designer, not a fashion house—they don't even take on house contracts, they can afford not to. So they don't make seasonal collections and take us to trade shows. They maintain a small stable: you, me, three other models plus a couple more who rotate. Taheen does private viewings, exclusive gallery appearances. Small clientele, but a lot of spending power. We're paid by the hour, get commissions for certain things."

Atam goes on, keeping to the practical details, concise and informative—xer interest in her is not adversarial, then. When xie offers to send her choreography mnemonics to practice at home, they both discover that her portable is too limited for that, offering no virtualization capabilities. "No matter, it's better to learn in person anyway." Xie admires her height, the breadth of her shoulders, and gently pushes at her spine until it meets Taheen's standards. Despite the differences between their physiques Atam is a good teacher, and halfway through Ovuha laughs—she cannot help it; this is a delightfully absurd lesson, an absurd present held up against her history and purposes.

"Did I say something funny?"

"No." Ovuha composes herself. "I remembered an off-color joke."

They finish for the day; Atam asks her which station she's bound for, and it happens—so xie claims—that their destinations are on the same line. At the turnstile Ovuha half-expects the interface to publicly delineate her, draw a clear and hard boundary between her and Atam, but it does not. Likely it is unnecessary for public interfaces to shame potentiates, because for most non-citizens their status is obvious. The huddled shoulders, the accent, the hollowed gazes. She knows how to go unmarked, behave as one who belongs. Still there are moments of lapse; she stares at the back of her hand, then at a glimpse of her eyes in the window. How strange it is to walk with her limbs so light, her

face so exposed.

On the far end of the carriage is a group of new arrivals, newer even than she, from Umrut—a territory under the Sparrow, but which must have since passed to the Comet. When she left the Comet was expanding fast, voracious, successful. Where once there were a dozen warlords, a dozen dominions, the Comet has reduced the tally to five. It catalyzed Ovuha's decision to seek Anatta, a decision which may prove a fool's or the ultimate victor's.

The Umrut are speaking in low voices, in a regional patois that is difficult for algorithms to unscramble: their bid for privacy. They are telling one another of someone they call Bhanu who can give them secure employment, contacts, ensure that the very minute their probation ends they will be crowned citizens. All they must give in return is a portion of their earnings for the next few years. Or run certain errands. Bhanu. A name Ovuha has heard before in the Jasmine, though she's never paid attention until now.

"You're thinking about something really deeply," Atam says.

Ovuha glances at xer. "Yes, that's rather rude of me. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to ignore you. You were saying?"

"Care for a coffee? I'd like to get to know you better."

She startles and, caught off-guard, loses sight of the Umrut group; they stream out with the disembarking passengers in an orderly line. Efficient, quickly gone. "Haven't we only just met?"

Atam's mouth quirks. "Isn't a coworker you just met the perfect person to invite for light dining?"

Ovuha weighs her response. "It seems vulgar to decline."

Atam brings her to an indoor topiary where filament trees trill and light up when brushed by wings or beaks. The birds themselves are organic, genuine animals, though bred in labs and so more vivid than nature would otherwise produce them. Claret starlings, emerald doves, topaz-and-copper pigeons.

Xie walks her through varieties of coffee, tea blends, milk; they show her the extensive menu of tisanes, syrups liquid or solid, spices and powders and fresh petals. Once she has made a decision, Atam orders a set of strainers, cups, and implements Ovuha might have mistaken for either medical or torture devices. Xie produces a lightly sweet brew, blending a quartet of teas, a drop of condensed milk and a froth of steamed coconut cream.

Despite her doubts, it proves more interesting—and more pleasant—than she anticipated. Ovuha takes a long draw. "It's a lovely result," she says. "I've never had anything quite like it."

"Yes, unique, isn't it? I usually add palm sugar to mine, but you struck me as someone who preferred things unsweetened." Atam gestures with a stirrer, a long metal thing that makes Ovuha think of a

tool which could dip into subcutaneous fat and excavate tender morsels. “Though I think you don’t enjoy the birds. Too tame for you —no?”

“Too tame,” she says, and is not surprised when the portable twitches against her wrist like a restless snake. All this performative solicitousness, this careful gallantry. “You’re my client.”

Atam blushes, putting down the stirrer. “I was hoping to draw it out, to make this more like courtship. You don’t have to.” Xer gaze falls. “I just didn’t expect they’d send me someone so handsome.”

“Of brutal beauty and a masterly disposition?”

Xie makes a choked noise. “I can’t believe they *told* you that.”

She lifts xer chin with her fingertips, tilting xer face toward her. “Take me to your home.” Aware, as she says this, that this may be an elaborate ruse—to entrap her, to frame her, to get her out of the way so that her contact may dodge their obligations to the old Thorn. But this is a lead, and she will pursue.

Atam lives in an apartment slightly smaller than Suzhen’s, part of a similar building: an edifice that looks like it has been hewn from black ice on the outside and whose floors spread like spilled silk. Xer home is decorated in jungle motifs, drapes of orchids and red-gold ferns, every piece of furniture upholstered in resplendent pelts: leopard, panther, ocelot, lion. A lynx peers out from behind a plush table. Ovuha expects it to be replicant, but it is merely particulate, Atam not having the time to take care of even a replicant, she judges.

“I’ve got three partners,” xie says as xie waves away the lynx—it dissipates into thin air. “We don’t cohabit so you and I will have total privacy. If you haven’t, ah, haven’t changed your mind.”

“What do you want done to you?”

“What are you willing to do?”

Ovuha smiles. In this light, she knows her teeth would glint, alluring as a tiger’s. “Surprise me. I can do… quite many things. I do not receive, of course.”

Xie stares at her, mouth parted, then shivers. “There’s—a few tools.”

These tools are various: a standing frame of solid metal bristling with restraints; a sensory deprivation helmet; a rack of iron rods—some sharp, others blunt—that can be switched to frigid cold or scorching heat. Atam lays out the terms and has them recorded by xer guidance. It is a mercenary arrangement, businesslike, and it surprises Ovuha that Atam remains as eager and desirous as ever by the time they’ve settled the details. Not that she’s new to such acts, and she knows the terms must be explicit and comprehensive beforehand. But this is the first time she’s engaged in sex this transactional. Or blatantly so, at least. She has fucked people for reasons other than

chemistry or connection before because their lust was useful to her, could be braided into loyalty. Like anything else, it is a tool.

Atam transfers access to the apartment's lighting to her, though xie retains control of particulate images that would activate in place of a safeword. Ovuha takes her time, though she counts the hour against when Suzhen would expect her home.

First she cuffs Atam in place, an easy task given that the frame has been tailored to xer, and arranges xer spread-eagled but still—for the most part—dressed. Little by little, she dims the lighting. She circles the frame and Atam, running her hands over the metal rods on their rack, letting them clang and tinkle. Some are very small, tapering to a needlepoint. Atam watches her with the same captive attention a fawn might watch a panther that has chased it across kilometers uncounted, has at last run it down.

Xie is far from unlovely, and on impulse Ovuha grabs xer jaw, kisses xer hard. Atam whimpers as she bites and scrapes her incisors over xer lips, and presses an iron rod across xer throat. Not with enough force to threaten the integrity of trachea, but it is enough to make xer groan and push against xer restraints.

In the quiet, xie pants.

Deliberately she brushes xer hair out of xer face, strand by strand, almost tender. She doesn't say anything; that way the fear—and for Atam, desire—heightens. The sensory deprivation helmet is soft in her hand, almost like gossamer, a pretty lavender shade. It hardens, once activated, into something more like carapace.

For an instant, she thinks of an entirely different mask, which she wore so often and for so long it was more her face than her current one could ever be. But she lets that thought fall away and affixes the helmet's parts to Atam. It holds on well, like everything else tailored for xer, slipping over xer eyes and then xer ears. She chooses to leave Atam's mouth free. The block on xer sight and hearing is thorough—Ovuha claps her hands right in xer face. No reaction.

Under pretext of selecting a rod, she takes cursory looks at the bedroom, but she knows whatever she does would be recorded and she doubts Atam would have anything lying about that'd be relevant. She touches every piece of paraphernalia Atam has laid out for her. But no reaction occurs and her hidden implant remains inert. Once more she very much misses her sensors, the apparatuses and heuristics that scan and measure and summarize. Almost like additional organs, an additional line of perception better attuned than sight and hearing.

She chooses a rod that is almost a knife: it is whetted to cobalt keenness, so much that light seems to scrabble for purchase on its frictionless edge.

They have agreed that Atam's clothes are fair game. She finds a

point of entry, slices down from collar to chest. Fabric rips nearly without sound, parts to reveal skin as luminous and unblemished as porcelain. She turns the implement in her hand to a low temperature, eight degrees Celsius, five degrees.

As she works, she wonders why Atam wanted a potentiate; as xie cries out and arches into the iron's subzero touches, she develops a theory. To Atam, to any citizen, she represents unfettered violence, the essence of the colonies and the exodus. Made safe, now that she is contained within Anatta's system, subjected to Samsara's civilizing influence. But exciting nevertheless, a touch of piquancy xie cannot find in partners born to Anatta. A fetish.

She turns the rod warm, hot, scalding. She stops at forty-seven degrees. With careful attention she avoids lingering on any one spot too long. Despite Atam's preferences for damage—and xie prefers a good deal—she doesn't intend to leave more than second-degree burns.

Xer perfect skin reddens. Xie thrashes.

By the time Ovuha is done, Atam hangs on the frame, limp and loose-limbed. Xer eyes are half-shut when she removes the mask, mouth ajar, saliva trailing down one corner. A low, hoarse moan as she unstraps xer. Wrists and ankles in pristine condition—the restraints are well-cushioned. The house drone wheels over to help, though Ovuha has no trouble carrying Atam to xer bed in her arms, the only position where she won't chafe xer developing blisters.

The drone emits instructions to her in a low, thrumming voice that she imagines belongs to one of Atam's partners. Ovuha knows how to give first aid, but she follows along regardless.

"You're amazing," Atam whispers, not opening xer eyes. "Though I would have liked you to brand your name onto me…"

"A little much for a first encounter, surely." She peels off the disposable gloves, hands them to the house drone. Every burn she's inflicted on Atam is coated in protean; they will heal without blemish in a day or two. This is merely play. "Would you like me to stay around?"

"I'll be fine. Could I—hire you again?"

"We will see." Whether she needs to strum this thread, whether Atam provides that connection she needs. But then she cannot survive here on Suzhen's grace alone—even a simple social tie could prove useful, could shore up her disguise. A little like accruing armaments, ammunition, in preparation for combat. She expects Suzhen will take offense at the analogy. More often than she should, Ovuha imagines what it'd be like if they had met under different circumstances. The trajectory that would have occurred in place of their freighted asymmetry. But if Ovuha succeeds, that could still be hers. She may

rewrite the crossing of their paths.

Homeward. Two stations from where she is meant to get off, a message pings her portable. From Rachel, the husband of the Wyomere family to whom she's given language lessons. He is asking if he can see her in a nearby hanging garden; he would like, he says, to thank her properly. Ovuha considers ignoring him, but something piques her curiosity.

The hanging garden is quiet this time of the day, filament trees thrumming like harps. The ground reflects the sky and the sky alone, admitting nothing of Ovuha or any other pedestrian, not even their shadows. A wealth of sky, stretching on and on. So many arrivals are shell-shocked by it, by the glassy atmosphere that can be breathed in and breathed out again without risk to lungs or brain. The light that is inexhaustible and open, alien to those who have spent all their lives in pinprick corridors and carotid tunnels, have known nothing beyond compressed existence within decaying stations.

Rachel is waiting for her in a gazebo that from afar looks like a bauble suspended between sky and sky. He greets her with news that he's found work, good work that he wouldn't have gotten without fluency in Putonghua. "It's a fine kind of job," he says, proud, "and the client wants someone articulate."

She guesses. "Bhanu must have helped far more than my lessons."

He beams. "Yes, he'll be helping my wife too. But your lessons did so much for us! When I have my first pay, I'll contact you."

A given that she will want to be repaid, that she needs the money as much as he, or at least that she's as greedy as Bhanu. A cut for everyone to whom one owes any measure of debt, so that in the end one may be free. "It's no hurry." Even so the promised compensation must be substantial or he would not have offered. Compensation as substantial as what Atam will transmit to her account, after the ribbon-fish intermediary has taken their percentage.

She studies him. Someone has polished him to a high gloss, without much regard for personal style. His lips are pastel blue, a point of jade dabbed beneath the cupid's bow. Ivory qipao, brass bracelets. It is not pleasant to look at but it is polish, and she does not think it is due to his caseworker's generosity. Wyomere inhabitants descended from exiles who prioritized their phenotypic purity above practical concerns. Like the rest of them, Rachel is naturally frail, with eyes like stained methane and hair the yellow of dead grass. A phenotype extinct on Anatta, and perhaps the client finds Rachel novel enough to warrant a high price. It may be the same sort of job Ovuha has just come away from. It may be quite something else.

"I wish you good fortune," she says, after a moment. "You and your family."

He nods, ringlets bobbing. “And we wish you the same. Oh!” His breath catches; she follows his gaze.

A double rainbow high in the sky, curving along the ground. It is artifice, but Ovuha murmurs, “A sign of good auspice.”

To a citizen. Good fortune, as with much else, is a privilege of those who deserve.

She would not see Rachel again until the broadcast that night.

In climax Vipada sounds bovine, the grunt through her teeth, the low shout from the back of her throat: a rutting bull, a tortured cow. Perhaps to Vipada’s other lovers this is arousing—the abandon, the unfiltered noise—but Suzhen decides that she’s not going to sleep with the actor again. Not that this time was a premeditated act or even something Suzhen was hoping for; Vipada invited her home for a drink, they kissed, and why not. *Why not*, Suzhen suspects, is a good reason to try a new cocktail or culinary novelty, but not necessarily sex with someone to whom she feels no real attraction.

Suzhen disentangles herself from between Vipada’s legs, wiping her mouth. Her jaw aches. At least Vipada tastes pleasant, clean. She tries not to think how much she would rather be in Taheen’s arms, enjoying the warmth of their palm on her jaw, the weight of their hand on her belly. Those hard lines of their muscles bunching and flexing against her skin.

The actor looks up at her through half-lidded eyes, her breathing harsh, her mouth parted. “That was very nice.”

“Thank you.” There doesn’t seem to be anything else to say.

“I’ve got interesting virtuality programs we could share. Or you could let me return the favor manually,” Vipada drawls, in a tone that makes it clear she has no such intention.

Not that Suzhen wants her to. Somewhere between foreplay and Vipada fingering her perfunctorily she’s been drained of all desire, the act has turned mechanical. “No, it’s fine.”

Vipada’s bathroom is a study in opulence, the ceiling panels done in clusters of pomegranates, the marble floor venting essential oils in low, perfumed clouds. Suzhen stands in front of a mirror and turns on a cool shower. She cups the water in her hands, watches it drip down between her breasts, and slowly touches herself. But her imagination comes up short in supplying her with an ideal lover, and she’s not in the place or time to virtualize. She gets clean. In the corner there is an immense metal apple that mixes body oils for her; she chooses orange and port wine.

“You smell so pretty,” Vipada says when she emerges. The actor is still in bed, nestled in ermines. Even her bedsheets, like all her furniture, seem selected to enhance her. The white and the red to

compliment the deep honey of her skin. “Anything catching your fancy in the liquor cabinet? Help yourself.”

It is easy, Suzhen supposes, for Vipada to be magnanimous with things that cost her no effort to dispense: liquor, toiletries, money. Not sexual reciprocation. Perhaps it is a matter of occupationally induced narcissism. Someone who takes on the robes of divinity, the mantles of warlords and monarchs onstage, and so accustomed to rapt attention—Vipada’s body is an object of worship. And a deity who receives tribute does not return it in kind; gods take, not give. Suzhen thinks inevitably of Samsara as she asks the drone to make her a drink. Even Vipada’s domestic unit is a cut above, its veneer nacreous, its face charmingly made. It curtsies.

“So how is your work?”

Suzhen swirls her glass of cream-topped, liquor-thickened coffee. “I’m thinking of quitting.” This comes out before she can stop herself. Vipada is the last person in whom she would confide. The thought is that much at the forefront, coiled to spring free.

Vipada sits upright. “But why?”

It astounds her, to be asked such a question. In a tone of such surprise. Surely the potential burnout—and the rates are high at the Bureau, save for careerists like Nattharat who are unburdened by conscience—must be obvious. Her mentor. His funeral. “A lot of us do.” She sips the coffee, inhaling deeply. Exquisite, as expected of anything Vipada owns. It galvanizes her to honesty. “The Bureau is a system. We’re functions. Drones would do the work I do just as well, more efficiently. There’s no reason for me to be there.”

“It’s humanitarian work, Suzhen. Having human faces is the point. How can a new arrival feel safe interacting with a drone?”

Safer by far than interacting with humans—the camp wardens, the Interior Defense officers. The face of Anatta punishment is human more than it is Samsara. She doesn’t say this. She doesn’t say, *How fucking dare you when you don’t know anything.* “That may be. I’m not doing anything meaningful and I’m exhausted.” Suzhen swallows another mouthful. So gorgeously made, so cold. How much simpler it is to enjoy a drink; how much simpler it would be to enjoy this as abstract discussion, one that has nothing to do with visceral experience and everything to do with intellectual experiments. “I’m exhausted.”

The domestic unit glides into the bedroom, bearing a bowl of sesame-dusted, sautéed jellyfish. It seems a heavy post-coital snack, especially when Vipada did none of the work, though Suzhen knows she’s being petty.

The actor purses her lips. “I’m not going to convince you to stay there if it makes you unhappy—I’m not your superior or any such

thing—but potentiates you helped would say your work's meaningful. Taheen told me a little and, how do I put this, I suspect not every caseworker is like you."

Such absolute, shameless manipulation. Suzhen imagines putting on her clothes, walking out. That would not be so difficult. "It is a process," she says slowly, "in which I no longer wish to participate." Much like fucking Vipada.

She returns to the domestic unit, asks for a mooncake—she might as well take advantage while she still can, almost a gesture of defiance. The actor follows her into the parlor, half-wrapped in a mauve robe, arms crossed. "It's not my business," Vipada begins. "I don't want to overstep anything."

"I'm sure you wouldn't." The mooncake is served, cut in thin slices. She samples one. Velvety filling—pandan custard and lotus seed, mixed just right—and hot enough to scald going down.

"And I didn't mean to sour things between us."

"The mooncake's fantastic." A connection request from Ovuha, which doesn't seem like her. Nevertheless Suzhen appreciates the rescue. "I've got to take this call. It's work. Do you mind?"

"Of course not."

The link opens. Ovuha is home and her tracker reports nothing alarming: this is no exigency. Suzhen relaxes. *Yes, Ovuha? How was Taheen's?*

It was fine. Would you tune into the news? Humor me. Channel ten.

Suzhen does. The feed flickers on, peripheral; channel ten is reserved for minor incidents, low on priority. It is reporting on an event barely hours old—*Rachel Luo, a potentiate from Wyomere… providing therapeutic service…*

The details fall away; they don't matter. What matters—what does not recede—is the body on the floor of what might be someone's apartment, an icy floor the color of snowdrift. Pieces of background detail: the hem of a curtain or upholstery, the leg of a chair or table. Pastel. Slowly being overwhelmed by the foreground.

Yellow hair on marble tiles, blood seeping between, saturating the ground like paint on canvas.

Chapter Seven

She's on a call with the caseworker assigned to Rachel Luo. A senior agent, careerist like Nattharat, the sort that doesn't burn out. Did he know Rachel Luo was signing up to provide therapeutic service? "It's legal," he says. "Potentiates finding a job isn't something I was going to get in the way of. Listen, Rachel was troubled. He had too many dependents—the wife is a mess, the children are sick most of the time, none of them could learn or get certified for anything. How they weren't separated and all the kids fostered is anyone's guess. Agent Suzhen, I'm taking your call as a courtesy, but you're interrogating me."

Therapeutic service. The terminology of elision. "I appreciate that, yes—"

"I've got a *lot* of other inquiries to field. And I will need to inform Rachel's family." He grimaces. Sighs. "So if you don't mind."

He ends the call. Suzhen rubs her eyes as the feed fades, leaving her alone in her bedroom. Her mouth is sour and thick, her pulse hammering against the thin sheath of her larynx. A potentiate dying is not new. By definition their mortality rate is higher, their existence more prone to sudden accident. Suicide is not easy but possible, there being no guidance to prevent it. Murder likewise, when both perpetrator and victim are potentiates.

She thumbs the door open; Ovuha stands behind it, hand lifted halfway to knock. "How are you feeling, officer?"

Said in the calmest voice as if Suzhen is the wracked patient, Ovuha the detached caregiver. The balance between them inverts. Suzhen presses her lips together. "I'm fine. My colleague wasn't too helpful." She exhales through her teeth. "He said it was an accident. That Rachel Luo's client didn't mean to go that far." A slip of the knife, a shock turned up too far, the therapy of controlled violence. Not always sexual, though it can be, an approved method for a citizen to vent destructive impulses on a human body. More satisfying, the effects more lasting, than anything virtual could ever be. Not all citizens need it, but enough do, and is it not *productive* to give potentiates a legal venue to work—

Her gorge surges, acute, acidic. The guidance is supposed to prevent this, stop it long before anything fatal can occur. It is almost prescient in its anticipation of human impulse.

"How well did you know him?" she says, for lack of any other conversation. Or a bid to right the balance, to leave Ovuha as stricken as she, as wounded.

"In passing. His children didn't particularly like me—not their

fault, I'm terrible around children—and his wife was wary of strangers." Ovuha folds her hands over her belly. "Is it possible for me to go back to the Jasmine? There's something I would like to retrieve."

"I thought you'd already gotten—" Not Ovuha's belongings, which have all burnt, but the bird gifted to her by Rachel Luo. "Hardly the most sensible idea."

"I won't disagree."

Not even a protest. Suzhen motions at her vanity seat. "There's no reason you should be on your feet. I'll look into how accessible the Jasmine is, whether I can authenticate you."

She watches Ovuha take in the bedroom and realizes, with leaden terror, that she has never let anyone into her bedroom for a long time; there was a reason she slept with Vipada at the actor's place, and every tryst with Taheen happens at their gallery. Her room is too personal, too close. Ovuha's presence is suddenly claustrophobic.

"What," Ovuha says slowly, "does the therapeutic service entails?"

"You already know."

"I can infer." Ovuha turns in the seat, gaze passing over the small wardrobe and its neat arrangement of cosmetics: the pigments in their frosted jars, the shade adjusters in their steel palettes, the nacreous dermal overlays in their refrigerated compartment. "It must make a certain sense. Rachel tried to find other work before and never could."

"It's prescribed for citizens in calibration who need it, like any medicine. The rules for it are strict. Nobody wants anyone dead."

"The imperative that informs every human choice needs to be curbed or given a safe outlet. I understand. And I'm sure those who provide this are honored. May I ask whether you've ever availed yourself of such a service?"

"No," Suzhen snaps. "That's a very personal question."

"Yes. But I wondered. You're flawlessly kind otherwise. Do you not resent me for taking up the space I do, for living off you, for gobbling up your time and strength like a leech? To you I'm not an intangible statistic which appeals to your charity. I am a physical body that takes and takes while giving nothing in return."

"What are you trying to provoke me into?"

Ovuha stiffens. Her expression creases, as if a lapse of judgment is like a bad dream from which she must fight to wake up. "Nothing. Or I don't know, or I can't say. It's childish and I have no right to behave so poorly. I expect many people are unfair to you, exactly because you're a saint, and I shouldn't be one more. And I think—" She shakes not her head but her entire upper body, the way an animal might, the way a hawk could. "It does not matter what I think."

The charge between them of things unsaid and the weight of their

histories, and Suzhen imagines blurting out, *I was a potentiate once* but the words curdle on her tongue. She *wants*. It would be a bridge. She shakes off the seafoam sheet in her lap and in a few strides she is standing over Ovuha. Leaning over, thinking that she wants, but what does she want precisely. A displacement of frustration and of course she has not failed to notice, from the beginning, Ovuha's looks. The engineered symmetry, the artificed magnetism. A person designed from conception for beauty. It is the wrong thing to think, even to consider. What is between them must be a bureaucratic boundary, changeless and unyielding.

Ovuha is looking up at her, face in Suzhen's shadow, and her expression is not the fear that Suzhen thought she'd see—the fear that finally her caseworker is not so virtuous, has given in to impulses as base as any camp warden's. "You asked me what I want from my life here." Ovuha has laid her hand on Suzhen's arm, light as spider feet. "I've been curious as to what you want."

It jars. She is caught out. "Out of life in general?"

"The tragedy of saints is that no one asks what can be done for them, only what they can do for others. I wish I could bring joy to your life, and I'd wish the same if we had met in a different time, a different place, and you'd never done anything for me at all." Ovuha's fingertips are rough against the thin skin of Suzhen's wrist, moving in small, slow circles.

"What would you do then? In a different time, a different place."

"Ask if you'd like to see or fly a hawk, help you put on gloves and set an amiable one on your wrist. Take you to a vineyard where the grapes are as big as my fist, and the wine comes in a hundred colors. Then I would discover you like neither hawks nor wine, and be entirely mortified."

Her mouth twitches. "There are vineyards on Gurudah?"

"As long as we're fantasizing, anything is available." Ovuha lifts Suzhen's wrist. "May I?"

It is a precipice. After this there will be no coming back. "Yes," Suzhen whispers, already anticipating the regret, the labyrinth she'll need to navigate just to achieve a semblance of ethics. To return to where they were just an hour ago, just yesterday.

Ovuha kisses her palm, gently, her mouth soft and hot. Twice. Teeth scrape against the pad of Suzhen's thumb. It is chaste contact, tame. The frisson that pierces her is like the onset of a fever, painful, delirious. She wants; this does not suffice. Ovuha's lips climb to her forearm, then the inside of her elbow. Suzhen thinks of Ovuha pressing her down, making conquest of her body, doing things to her that someone like Vipada can't imagine in a thousand years. She pictures herself rising and falling beneath Ovuha's sure hands.

“We are stopping here.” Suzhen swallows. Her throat is dry. “You didn’t have to do this.”

“I don’t pursue or permit anything I don’t desire. My sense of ownership to my body is absolute.” Ovuha has not let go of her wrist, her lips close to the point of Suzhen’s pulse. “I almost wish you were less honorable, but then I wouldn’t be so attracted. This leaves us at a peculiar impasse, don’t you think.”

Suzhen pulls away. “It doesn’t. There is no impasse. There’s abuse of power on my part.” She opens the window. Fresh air on her skin; she breathes deeply. The evening scintillates with traffic vectors, noisy without the soundproof pane. *I don’t even think of you that way* would protest too much, evidently false. But there was no latent lust, just an unscrambling of the senses by crisis, by her own trauma. Stress misfires into something else. “I put you into this situation. I made you —”

Ovuha cants her head, hands steepled in her lap, the picture of control. “If you believe I possess agency, then it follows that I would exercise it. I wasn’t always powerless and my personhood wasn’t always in question. But I understand that I could make my consent explicit until I’m blue in the face and you would still believe it compromised.”

She has to transfer Ovuha. But to whom—not to anyone like Nattharat, and most at the Bureau are more Nattharat than they are anything else. The ones who aren’t have long quit, or are too new to sponsor a potentiate, too new to handle… this. The model potentiate. The one that should be easy to speed through probation, the case that should be absolutely simple. “The Jasmine is accessible to caseworkers. I sent a request. I can look around the rooftop for you.”

“I would prefer to be there. If that is all right.”

Tomorrow she will look for an agent, she will find someone she can trust. And treating Ovuha as a project that can be turned over, that is itself a denial of personhood, of Ovuha as a full adult being. But the alternative she cannot bear. Not that Suzhen will ever be disciplined, especially if Ovuha does not file a complaint; there is room to flex and exploit, for caseworkers as it is for camp wardens. A caseworker could even claim it as therapeutic. The potentiate as the least of the least, anything inflicted upon them given sanction.

“Fine,” Suzhen says. “We’ll be there and back quickly. Dress for the cold.”

On the ride Suzhen is silent, remote, keeping a physical as well as conversational distance. Sufficient space between them to fit three passengers. Ovuha does not push, she knows better, but she glances at Suzhen and finds the officer tense, mouth a thin line. Billboard

reflections fall across her in shards, in fragments. In profile she is an ephemeral sculpture, carved from skull and shadow.

Ovuha thinks again of how much easier it would be, if they'd met elsewhere. She understands herself well enough, the impulses that drive her to want Suzhen, to have this woman for her own. Like anyone, she is not impervious to the appeal of a benefactor who gives and gives, and does not demand. What she does not understand is Suzhen's character, how Suzhen can maintain this resolve. In a world where she must have been taught that such resolve—such empathy—is neither necessary nor socially encouraged. No peer of Suzhen's would fault her for making use of Ovuha, for finding satiation in Ovuha's body.

"Does it work?" Ovuha asks mildly. Picking up from where they left off. "The therapy."

"Samsara has judged it the best answer. Since it was introduced in calibration routines, rate of attempted crime has dropped to near zero." Suzhen's tone is clipped. "By that metric, yes, it works."

"What other metric exists?"

To this she receives no response: Suzhen has shut down, Ovuha has pushed too far. A misstep, but one Ovuha knows she's been careening toward. She has been reckless with this woman, in more ways than one.

They land on the balcony of the Jasmine's midsection. There is no security present. Repair drones crawl along the building's façade, undoing years of disuse, sealing up the cracks and impact sites—usually from within—on the windows. The complex is ready for habitation. Residents haven't been moved back, Ovuha expects, on account of human inefficiency. Someone has not approved a process, someone else has not signed for the relocation of potentiates. Disinterest or malice, the result is the same. The handling of potentiates is regulated by Samsara, as all else is, but day-to-day matters fall under human management. The only area of civilian life on Anatta where people decide other people's fates.

Suzhen glances at the elevator. "We'll have to use the stairs."

The stairways are compressed, narrow, though cleaner than Ovuha has ever seen them. The drones have scraped and melted away a decade's worth of filth and the corridor smells of solvents. Lights come on as they mount the steps and fade behind them, an antiseptic gleam that makes a ghost of everyone. Eight floors up, a long climb where the only sounds are the muted buzz of drones and their footsteps and their breathing. She watches the small of Suzhen's back, starkly outlined; one of the most magnificent features on a human body, Ovuha has always thought, that point where the spine curves, sinuous. She used to fit her palm against a lover's spine just so. The

biochemist to whom Ovuha could show her face, one of the few. Briefly Ovuha wonders how she is doing now. Well, she hopes, being a civilian.

Suzhen's breathing grows loud and hitched. She leans against the railing and gasps. "How are you not even breaking a sweat?"

"I used to take these stairs to keep my stamina. Would you let me head to the roof alone? I'll be fast."

"Go ahead." Suzhen clutches at her side, heaving. "Not like I'm in any shape."

The rest of the way is faster, though Ovuha paces herself. She does not want to reach the rooftop winded, adrenaline squandered on the climb. It is not that she expects danger, precisely. But she prepares.

She steps out. Before her the evening is oxblood, wintry. Anatta is a beautiful world, the dream of the progenitor planet given exquisite form. Even the lace of cirrus seems handspun, the climate grids like seed pearls sewn into the atmosphere's gown. Samsara governs, but once it was built to serve and to ensure every sight is pleasing to the human eye.

Not much has changed on the roof. The drones have left the botanical efforts alone, and the stone garden remains as she last saw it. The cardinal sits in its cage, as blue as ever and as mechanical. Its head swings toward her, twitching. For a moment she waits, listening. Nothing to the naked eye, the naked ear.

Ovuha opens the cage. The cardinal twitters. It is untampered with; she tucks it into her pocket.

"About time you turned up."

She catches the reflection in the birdcage's bars, an image of an image. Physically she is alone. She turns.

The image is flat, projected onto a wall, oversaturated. The man is spare to the point of gaunt, more cybernetics than skin. Replacement jaw and replacement joints, all gleaming a muted gray, unmistakable in what they are. He by intention does not wear prosthesis that passes for flesh.

"You recognize me," he says.

A tell. She must have shown—a flicker of the gaze, a twitch of the mouth. He was not always called Bhanu, not when he was lieutenant to the Warlord of the Mirror. But he has retained his face, his voice, his accent. He's done nothing to hide who he was. It is a gesture, foolishness or boldness. Given that he has survived, likely the latter. "I've heard much about you," Ovuha says. "If one is in need of work, or hard-pressed to obtain citizenship, it is Bhanu whom one must turn to."

"You are not from Gurudah. Zero phenotype match, unless you

were a designer baby. But Gurudah can't afford that, can it? Splicing out a few defects, cleaning up inherited diseases, not conjuring up a perfect child off a foreign genetic base. You made a mistake, Ovuha Sui. If Ovuha is even the name you were born with."

Is he the contact, then, the old Thorn's accomplice and therefore hers. But she cannot ask, not even to confirm whether he sent the ribbon-fish intermediary. And if she is wrong, then she is standing on the brink. All will fall down and crumble in an instant. "This seems thin evidence on which to build a case that I'm not who I appear to be. I've come a long way to reach Anatta, the same as everyone else. We all do what we must to make this voyage. Much as you must have."

Bhanu continues to study her. On his end she doesn't doubt he sees more clearly than she does, a gaze that slices through and picks at information in the bend of her jaw, the angle of her cheekbones. The things that make up her dossier. "What you must indeed. With a face like that, I expect you were a favorite of the wardens." His voice lowers, insinuating, his mouth lifting into a suggestive curve.

In provocation a person's character may be learned; pushed to fight/freeze/flight, reactions become predictable—the parameters have been narrowed down to a trinary. She returns his smile, returns his gaze. "You are right, I was a favorite to some because I could barter my skills. The value of my face you overestimate, and I am not wise to the crude matter of which you speak."

"Who," he says, "are you?"

He must know and this is an act. Or he may not know, and is acting in genuine hostility. "I'm an asylum seeker in whom you've decided to take an interest for reasons I cannot discern. Was it because I turned down your offer of protection?"

He cocks his head, avian, and leans forward. She imagines him with a long reptilian neck, a set of beaks glittering like frost. "I'm interested in what you will do. In five minutes, this building will collapse. The detonation starts from the top, this ought to give you plenty of time."

The image fizzes out. He is not staying to watch her reaction, at least not anywhere she can see. It may be a bluff to measure Ovuha, how gullible she is, how she assesses risk. She lacks the sensors necessary to verify his threat.

She starts moving, calculating the vertical distance, the velocity. It is possible, with minutes to spare if she was on her own. She darts past the defunct elevators into the stairway and looks down the first set of steps. Too slow.

Ovuha vaults over. Anywhere else, safety features would have prevented it. She falls down the next four floors and catches herself on

a banister. Her muscles pull taut, a radiance of agony, and she levers herself up. She is breathing harder than she would like, face to face with a startled Suzhen. “Officer, we’ve got to get out now.”

Suzhen looks at her, mouth tight, but does not ask. Willing to humor a potentiate seized by spontaneous panic, perhaps, in the grip of some flashback—fleeing Gurudah, evacuating a ship on the verge of expiring. Ovuha looks down: three minutes and forty seconds left. She doesn’t care to chance it.

She grabs Suzhen and slings the officer over her shoulder. “What __”

“No time.” Ovuha runs, leaps.

The impact is harder, Suzhen’s weight unbalancing her, and she nearly lands face-first on the stairwell. She does not. From above there is a keening of architecture under stress, the scrape of blast doors. Some would drop, others would stutter halfway. Ovuha keeps running: she has no reason to trust the Jasmine’s emergency measures.

They clear the stairway. One last dash as the rooftop crumbles, a hail of façade and building-bones.

In the car, sheltered, their bodies nest in one another’s. Their sweat, their panting, the roar of blood like post-coitus. Ovuha laughs, hoarse and abortive. She presses her head to the glass and watches the spider flowers fall, the spotted ferns, the shredded leaves. Like ashes they are buoyant, resistant to gravity the way human bodies are not. They will drift a long time and will not burst open on the ground.

Chapter Eight

This particular labyrinth of streets, half the world across. This is not where Suzhen belongs; this is not where she wanted to visit again. The jungle city Himmapan. The buildings are broad and photosynthetic, rough brown, bright jade. Floors sprawl like massive boughs, mantled in silver moss. The beauty of Himmapan is in the canopies, the proximity to the sky, the ophidian rooftops where human-faced birds roost. But it is the ground that Suzhen seeks, the footpaths like hard mulch, the shadows like green tar. The sun is far from here.

She passes other pedestrians. Every last one a citizen, luminous and full of purpose. Himmapan has almost no potentiate population. A child sits on an overhead window, feet swinging, cupped safely within the blunt talons of a domestic drone. Safer still within the hand of their guidance. Born citizens get that installed early, toddler years, shorn of privacy before they can speak. It is not without advantages. Down here the child may play and run as they please in perfect security.

Bhanu. The name broke off in Ovuha's mouth, staccato. *You know of him?*

He's a ghost we whisper about at the Bureau. A gossip item. Potentiates need a saint to pray to.

Further away from sunlight still, from the laughing child. The shadows are nearly solid, she can almost grasp them in her hands and coil them around her knuckles. All those years ago, after her mother's death, this is where she came. She entered a potentiate, emerged a citizen. The site of her rebirth, the site of her remaking. She looks at the unmarked door, crooked, black save for the glints of colorful, polished glass. They are sharper than they look: she knows this from experience, the memory of needlepoint blood on fingertips. But she doesn't need to touch the door—it parts for her. She steps in, breathing dust. The door shuts and then she is in the dark, her only point of reference a dim illumination ahead and a low, electronic susurrus.

The escalator down is as long as katabasis, as ponderous. She hears gurgling water, the exhalations of fish and abyssal creatures. The light is diffuse, as of heat and sun enfeebled by relentless chill. Bhanu told her that he originally wanted to make this place a memory of the red world and the palace of the Mirror, those infinite corridors and their countless doors. In the end it would have risked too much, he said.

She touches bottom. There is flat ground, and no more escalator.

The way ahead is cavernous, ceiling and walls glistening. Ossified eyes gaze down at her, track her movement, clicking as they rotate in their sockets.

Music, slow and seismic. A packed dance floor, ground fog up to Suzhen's waist, made of perfume and cigarette stink. Figures gyrate, slashed by harsh light, jostling each other and pushing toward center stage. She flinches and avoids as best she can the slightest contact. Around her desultory conversation seethes in different languages, a multitude of patois.

The bar is a crescent, circumscribed by high jagged stools like upholstered stalagmites. There is no one behind the bar, only a constellation of glasses. Each is delicately blown and gorgeous and fractured, a crack in the stem, a fragment chipped off the rim. She pushes herself onto a seat and lays her hands flat on the countertop. It is immaculate, without the stains of glasses and cups, without the stickiness of spilled drink. This is not because it is kept clean: it is because the bar has never been used at all. "Bhanu," she says.

The music changes and accelerates into something with teeth, hurting her eardrums. The light changes. If she turns around, she'll see clearly that the dancers are not human but fleshy, faceless mannequins with the bloated, wriggling skin of corpses giving nest to maggots. She does not turn around.

Someone joins her, taking up the seat adjacent. Across the bar two specters resolve from the ground fog and the jangled illumination: a copy of her, a copy of him.

"Thank you for making time for me."

"I always make time for you."

She glances at him and discovers he didn't send a mannequin. It is him, in the flesh. The years have passed Bhanu by without bruising or creasing him. The ageless metal parts, the tight skin. He does not look young, but he didn't look young when she and her mother arrived. Her mother aged and weakened while Bhanu didn't. For this she will always resent him.

Across the bar their phantoms sip drinks and talk, but differently. Weather, politics, the shape of Himmapan. Where is the newest gallery, does he have recommendations, what does he think of that arena sport. This will be what her guidance witnesses and records, its senses fooled by the convolution of interference and duplicates and decoy signals. Bhanu has only ever deployed it twice before, once for her mother speaking with him, another time for Suzhen speaking with Xinfei. To give mother and child a moment, tremulous, of total privacy. A veil Samsara may not penetrate, is not even aware exists.

"Ovuha Sui," Suzhen says.

"Is not who she says she is."

Her fist closes. “What of it?” Neither is she, neither is Bhanu.

“I expect she’s a little like us. She was somebody. And that makes her fraught. You’d do well to make her someone else’s problem.”

She remembers how easily Ovuha carried her, the tremendous strength. The way Ovuha handled the situation like someone with combat experience. “I was in that building.”

“Not within blast radius, not in a spot at risk of structural integrity. I’d never harm you. My duty to my lord didn’t end when she fell. It is forever, or at least until you die of old age.” His simulacrum makes a joke and laughs, too loudly. “But you’re making this duty unnecessarily difficult.”

“She came into my care. I’d prefer you don’t try to kill her.” Arson, explosives. What next.

He draws a wine flute down from overhead, as simply as picking a ripe fruit. He turns it in his hand. There is nothing to pour into it, though she expects Bhanu can produce liquor from beneath the counter, or through sleight of hand. “She poses a unique risk to you. I don’t need to belabor why. My lord bade me ensure you not only survive but thrive. This woman, whoever she was, gets in the way of that.”

“Tell me what you think she used to be.”

“It would be useful to find out, but it would be more expedient to simply do away with her. A foot soldier, a pilot, an officer. Who knows. She might have deserted or her lord was vanquished. Coward, either way.”

This is the one concession, the one point for which she cannot hate Bhanu. His desire was to stay to the end, at the Mirror’s side. *You would die for me,* the warlord told him while Suzhen eavesdropped. Yes, my lord, he most likely said. *Good. Now I command you to live for me. That will be harder, I think. But I trust in your resilience.*

Born to serve, dedicated wholly to it, and his lord turned him away. He would have done anything for the Mirror and this, as she said, was the hardest.

“I’ve never thought of her as my parent.”

Bhanu stares at her, silent.

“To me, as to you, she was the lord.” Of that red world, of all that Suzhen knew. Whether she saw the Mirror unmasked, whether the Mirror was tender to her, all that was beside the point. “If I have Ovuha transferred to another agent, would you leave her be?”

“I will refrain from having her killed.”

It is a compromise. It is not one she will accept. “Not good enough. If so, I’ll keep her with me until her six months are out, and your next attempt is going to either kill me too or maim me for life.”

Bhanu puts the wine flute down, spinning it on the countertop. It

rolls, making brittle harmonics. “Even if I don’t do anything, keeping her with you will either kill or maim you regardless because of the trouble she attracts. She is at least willing to put you out of harm’s way, so she may not be entirely honorless.”

What is honor, Suzhen thinks, amazed that he still talks of this intangible philosophy. But she’s achieved her preferred result; *she may not be entirely honorless* is a concession. Bhanu will leave Ovuha alone, for now. “She’s a person of function. And very human, for all that.”

“Empathy isn’t a virtue you can afford. Even this world doesn’t teach this thing as a virtue.” Another clink. The glass whirls, dangerously close to the edge. “You would think they would. Empathy sounds like it should be the natural enemy of violence.”

“It isn’t.” One can have empathy for select human beings and regard the rest as parasites. It is the simplest compartmentalization in the universe, this dividing and sub-dividing of other people, the way Anatta’s system already does for them. Suzhen expects Nattharat holds empathy for her children, her husband.

Bhanu doesn’t comment. “Are you in need of anything?”

She is in need of peace and certainty, but those are not commodities he can secure. He is powerful enough to acquire citizenship, the most expensive luxury there is, but he cannot purchase or bargain for contentment. “I’m fine. Looking into a career change, and I can handle that myself.” A few application forms sent and by the time Ovuha has completed her probation, Suzhen will have a new post waiting that suits her inclinations and abilities. Samsara provides.

“Good. Get away from this. I’ve never thought,” he adds, “that you resembled the lord in any way. Power is cultivated, not inherited.” He leans forward and the specters dissipate, closing off a conversation about fusion food.

It is half an insult. Suzhen was never trained to succeed the warlord. She still doesn’t know why she was conceived, other than as a whim, the Mirror’s whim to create a family. And love, perhaps there was that, making even warlords into fools.

Suzhen did not ask her mother whether love was a factor, a variable in the red world’s equation.

The domain of the Mirror was called Vaisravana. A heartbreaking name, she used to think.

Tatters of gauze, white, across Ovuha: lateral to her torso, scattered over her thighs and ankles like discarded paper, shriveled lilies. She lies as an injured body, the bed slanted so that her head points lower than her feet. She is naked. Atam stands to the side and gazes, avid, almost trembling.

“You’d have beautiful feet,” the painter, Zurun, says. “If only you took better care of them.”

From her vantage point she is unable to see em. Her line of sight is constricted, upside down. What she sees: Atam’s knees, the bottom line of the mezzanine waterfall, a fraction of the window. “Does a corpse need beautiful feet?”

“A corpse needs beautiful everything if it is to be painted.” Zurun clicks eir tongue, a birdlike noise. “Hold on for a little longer and shush.”

Ovuha holds. She watches the water, the unsteady stance of Atam. Zurun’s interest has remained strictly aesthetic, almost clinical. The painter is intrigued by the arches of feet, the edge of cheeks, the exquisiteness of the human skeleton. A fetish for bones. Atam’s fascination is more composite, flesh as well as what scaffolds it, and xie hides that poorly. It amuses Ovuha to be the body on display, objectified twice over. To be witnessed entirely for her stylistic value. She ought to feel outrage.

“All right.” Zurun rises with a rustle of taffeta and articulated dress-joints. Ey tosses eir hair away from the small electrum antlers that decorate eir brow. “You can get up.”

Ovuha stands, too quickly. She waits for the blood in her head to pour down, resettle. The gauze falls away, new-old skin quickly shed. Zurun’s drone collects it. Atam hovers, xer eyes carefully on Ovuha’s face, though she’s caught them veering downward before. “Is there anything else?” Ovuha asks.

Zurun has stepped away from eir canvas. Ey circles it, head bent to the portrait of Ovuha-as-corpse. “Are you allergic to feathers?”

“Not at all.”

“Birdcage,” Zurun muses. “The question is, what kind of bird? What do you think, Atam?”

Xer brow furrows. “A bird of prey?”

“Not very colorful by nature, but maybe it’s the impression that matters. Let me see what I’ve got.” Zurun doesn’t use particulate projection or virtual superimposition. Eir props are real, tangible objects. Ey glides away to eir storeroom, expression turned inward.

Ovuha glances at the waterfall that cascades endlessly from the mezzanine, a pennant of perfect light. Stray droplets have caught in her lashes. “Is ey supposed to poach from Taheen?” Who is out in Zurun’s parlor, snarling at some industry contact, last she saw of them.

Atam twitches, inhaling sharply. “They share models sometimes. Taheen is something of a scout. People they’ve picked out as beautiful and interesting tend to go on to have glamorous careers.”

“What about you?” Ovuha remains bare; she considers arranging

herself to best take advantage of shadow and water, the better to entice Atam's gaze.

"I like being where I am. Steady work, pays well." A ripple of shoulders. "The industry is full of vipers. Everything is competition, anyone a step above is someone you kiss up today and ruin tomorrow. The slightest disagreement turns into epic feuds. Everyone is incredibly neurotic, they go for five behavior calibrations a month. Taheen is more even-keeled than most and I wouldn't want to get closer to them than employer and employee."

"I heard all that," Zurun says, emerging from eir storage with arms full of feathers. Narrow ones, broad ones, ones with eyes. "Atam isn't wrong, of course. What do you think? Do you want a career?"

Ovuha cants her head, noncommittal. "I'm more of Atam's party than anything."

Zurun's eyes glaze over as ey searches for anatomical diagrams of birds, selecting references from eir datasphere. Then ey draws on Ovuha with thin, gray ink. Lines of hollow bones, lines of aerodynamics. "I'm not going to affix wings to you," the painter is saying, "that would be so kitschy. Kinnaree. Hah. Have you ever been to Himmapan?"

Ovuha says no, and lets the painter glue plumage to her body. Feather by feather, coverts and filoplumes. In a moment the suggestion takes shape. Not a kinnaree but wings flaring across her stomach, a lone talon extending from her hip, an avian eye peering from between her breasts. She is a human cage through which a falcon struggles, piecemeal, to burst out and win its freedom.

"Taheen is going to steal this idea when they see it," Atam murmurs.

The painter waves eir hand. "Let them. As long as they pay my licensing fee. Artistic symbiosis is a lovely, profitable thing."

Atam looks from Zurun to Ovuha, xer glance conspiratorial. "Doesn't Ovuha get a small cut? I usually do."

The painter chortles. "Do you see, being of Atam's party has its perks. Dry detail and accounting, the things that keep the world on its axis. Yes, she gets a cut. Ovuha, let's try several poses. I'll have to chew on the image for a day or two. We're going to go for saturated colors in the backdrop, I think. Impressionistic maybe."

Ovuha doesn't relish the thought of putting on all these props again tomorrow or the day after, but it is as Atam says: the pay is good, the work far from onerous. These are the building blocks, a path toward blending in. She stands with arms spread; she sits curled, fetal, as if to keep the falcon in; she stands on the edge of the mezzanine, limned by water and on the verge of plummet. A variety for Zurun to contrast and record. Ovuha wonders how quickly her face will detach

from the images, the design. These portraits are not about the subject but the painter.

They are done. She is given privacy to dress, and in the bathroom —decorated in mermaid shadows and albatross wings—she consults the scrap of code that she finally found by viewing the replicant cardinal through a filter of the neurotoxin map. She closes her eyes, visualizing as she peels the feathers from skin, adhesive coming off in gray rinds. The cardinal's cipher is unique in that only she and her predecessor know it, told in non-sequitur poetry, using allusions she would recognize but which would be meaningless to anyone else. From it she extracts names. Just four. Two she can recognize, one of them a halfway house warden, the other an Interior Defense captain she occasionally sees on broadcasts. It's an incomplete list and she'll need to find more, but all things considered it is adequate. Each name is an investment the old Warlord of the Thorn made, a web of enormous resources to prepare for Ovuha's arrival on Anatta. Years of conditioning, of altering thought and behavior, of concealing minds inside minds.

Atam visibly relaxes to see her dressed again as she emerges into the parlor. Taheen has finished their acrimonious call with their hapless contact, takes one look at Ovuha and says, "The two of you, are you sleeping together?"

"*Taheen*," Atam gasps.

"It's just that you make it terribly obvious, Atam. Either you're together or you'd very much like to be." The couturier turns to Ovuha. "Sorry to be indelicate, but I like to keep ahead of these things among my models. It happens."

Ovuha adjusts the lapels of her fresh, crisp jacket. "Very mindful of you. If it is true, what would you like to do about it?"

They chuckle over Atam's spluttering. "Nothing. Just do let me know if it goes south, please, so I can separate you. These things can sour a working environment, the two of you being so professionally involved, and I'm your primary employer."

"I will keep it in mind."

They leave Taheen to discuss artistic symbiosis and licensing agreements with Zurun. In the elevator—a long way up to the nearest train station, Zurun's studio being in a lower stratum—Atam exclaims, "I can't believe Taheen said that. I'd never even *seen* you naked until today and it's in a professional context!"

"It did seem unnecessary," Ovuha says, "though admittedly they have a point." Pettily expressed, even so, tactless—a little spiteful. She doesn't think it is because Taheen has an opinion one way or another where Atam finds xer carnal delights. More likely it is to do with Ovuha and Ovuha's presence in Suzhen's life. The glimmer of feeling

she's witnessed when Taheen speaks of Suzhen. "Would you have preferred that I deny it?"

"No. Well. Of course not. But it's not as though we're… I mean, I hired you. It's not as though I *earned* you by wooing and seducing."

Ovuha leans against the wall. Most elevators in this city are like pieces of a beehive, hexagons in dark quartz and lava stone. "Am I something to be earned?"

Xie flushes. "That's not what I meant, that you're a commodity, an object. But it's different. You know it is. I didn't fairly engage your interest, I didn't convince you I was a good prospect in bed. If our places were switched at the studio, me the one modeling nude and you the one clothed, you wouldn't have paid me any attention."

For a fleeting instant, she visualizes what that would be like, if Suzhen had been the one stripped, plumage glued onto her a little at a time. "You underestimate your own charms. There's an inviting softness to you, you're like an instrument that begs to be played."

"It's so unfair," Atam says. "You're superhumanly comfortable in your skin and you're stunning. And you're so good at flattery. Debonair, that's the adjective for you."

She thinks back to the surgery. Her face is a work of art, but like Zurun's portraits, it is a demonstration of technique and skill; the subject—the canvas—is secondary. "I suppose so." She smiles then. "We should make another appointment. I would arrange it between the two of us, but I expect that would offend the people in charge of this. It must be a specialized job, matchmaking us."

"Matchmaking!" Xie tosses xer pastel hair, locks of blue and white and pink flying. "Oh, why not, we can think of it that way. You're far too romantic. But I've never met or talked to any of them, either, though they aren't from the Selection Bureau—I don't think? I used to think this was overseen by Samsara, but…"

The elevator stops. They have reached the streets. "Let me see if I can woo you in turn," Ovuha says. She might glean something about the connection, might weave it into what she's learned of Bhanu. "Is there a café or bistro nearby that you like?"

Xie raises an eyebrow, but does not look displeased. "Sure. There's a place."

It has just rained; every surface refracts. Under this glaze everything is of surpassing beauty, newly made. The broad avenues, the overhead thoroughfares, the gleaming shells of lifts. Outside the camps and the selection waiting rooms, Anatta is never busy or crowded—footpaths are never congested, commercial districts and hospitals are never too full. The world housed so many more once, Ovuha knows; today's population is only a fraction of a fraction. Humanity quartered and then quartered again—down to what

proportion is a fact lost to time, or a figure Samsara has chosen not to preserve. Ovuha thinks about the AI often, cannot avoid doing so.

Beside her, Atam has stopped walking, has gone inert altogether, as if gripped by premonition. “Oh,” xie breathes.

“Yes?”

“Samsara. Samsara’s descending. We get a whole day—”

And it is as though the rain was mandated to set the stage. The light turns gold, liquid, pouring down the length of street. In the sky, Samsara. It looms giant, making a crown jewel of the sun, a mantle of the fibrous clouds, a grid-brocade of the horizon. This is not the aspect of war shown to prisoners and defeated armies, the one with incandescent briars. This one is soft, with gentle eyes and a mouth of endless magnanimity. The aspect of gift.

A multitude of Samsara proxies, then, these more human-sized—though still tall, each body well over two meters. They drop down from the air, emerge from between buildings, rise from the citrine tide. Countless seeds of faith blooming to sudden divine flowers. Each proxy separates from the mass, citizen-seeking. A face like sweet dreams and childhood memories, a voice lifted in song.

One approaches, holding its gleam-gloved hands out to Atam. Xie goes without looking back.

Chapter Nine

Suzhen comes home to the aromas of cooking, of domesticity. This is what her apartment has become, to return and be greeted and welcomed and fed, a beautiful stranger and the illusion of a perfect life. She smells garlic and scallions; she smells the temptation of claiming this life as her own.

Ovuha does not look up from her work, her hands gloved in flour, moving and kneading. “Did you have a good trip out of the city?”

“I went to wage battle for your soul.” She says this dryly.

“Thank you.” A faint smile. “I understand hyperbole. But you’ve been doing so much for me. And I understand battle.”

Suzhen studies those hands, though much is hidden by the white. She pictures those long fingers wrapped around the grip of a gun. Incongruity should not surprise her; after all, the Warlord of the Mirror stepped out of her armor and put a child on her lap, and might have even chopped vegetables. She can’t remember. “What kind of battles do you understand?” She meant to ask what is for dinner, but there it is instead.

“The same ones everyone else does. The wear and tear of life. Paperwork. Standing in line. Ah. I must wash my hands.”

She stands there and thinks of soaping up her hands, scraping off the dough from beneath Ovuha’s nails. Their fingers under the water together. It is the most mundane thing imaginable, the most absurdly intimate. She would not do that with Vipada. How ludicrous she is being, to want not even Ovuha’s mouth but this chaste gesture. Maybe this was the secret, the fulcrum on which her conception turned, a warlord’s wish for closeness and a place to come home to. Banal. Human.

“It’s occurred to me,” Ovuha says, wiping her hands dry, “that you don’t say much about yourself, or even at all.”

“I don’t.”

“I barely have any idea what you like to eat.”

“All your cooking is good.”

“Or what you like to wear, or what you enjoy doing as a hobby.”

“I have no hobby to speak of. Taheen found you a second patron, I heard.”

Ovuha bends her head, reaching up as if to touch her hair. It has grown quickly, grazing her shoulders. In the camps hair is shorn until it sits close to the skull, stubbly. “A painter named Zurun. I have no complaint—ey’s already paid me for the first session, even. I owe Taheen no small amount. They’re an exemplary person, despite their pretense to the contrary.”

An angle from which Suzhen can push the conversation away from herself. “You aren’t wrong. They’re more compassionate than they let on, and usually better to me than I deserve.”

“And so? Is that a thing we measure, the quality of deserving? You have been more than good to me; do I not deserve your kindness?”

“That isn’t the same.” Suzhen checks, and there have indeed been a couple transfers to Ovuha’s account. She authenticates, freeing the sum up for Ovuha to spend. She does this automatically, without thinking. There it is, the reminder of bureaucracy and of what she is; so much for the fantasy. “At any rate it’s good your second patron is decent.” She falters, alarmed at her puckered vocabulary. This is good, that is good. There is no reason for her to be this tense and this fraught. She has made her decision and declared it before Bhanu, and that is almost as absolute as declaring her intention before a god. “Let’s be fair. You haven’t talked about yourself all that much.”

“I’d have thought I did that too much as it is, to the point of narcissism. What else have I talked about?” She does touch her hair now, finger-combing it, as if not entirely sure of its texture or length. Like everything about her it is well-made, fine and straight. “Kindness catches me by surprise. Yours, Taheen’s. Would you like dinner now or would you rather freshen up first?”

Suzhen discovers that she would, indeed, rather freshen up first. A domestic drone may cook but it will not ask that, anticipate that she is tired and grimy from three hours of travel. It could be coded to acknowledge those things, given a simulacrum of personality, but she’s never bothered; it seems pathetic to want that of a machine, something only lonely people would do. Only she has become one of those people, and though Samsara’s rules say that all ways of life—solitaire or pair or multitudinous—are equally valid, it is difficult not to feel that she has failed. It isn’t even that she needs to worry about frailty in old age. The state will take care of her, she’ll always have a domestic drone with medical modules appended to it, a warm caring voice if she opts for that. Even her mother’s voice, should she require. All her days will be comfortable. She can live to a hundred eighty, two hundred. The reward of embracing Samsara. Partnership was socially required once, a convention for survival. Not any longer.

Mid-shower, Vipada calls. Suzhen keeps the visual off on her end. “Yes,” she says. Her head is craned far back for the cilia to massage and lather her scalp. Her vision is one half bathroom ceiling, one half Vipada lounging in her sofa.

“I’m co-hosting a wedding. Pretty traditional affair. Two spouses. Well, they’re both married already, so this will be their second simultaneous marriage. I picked the caterer. The food’s to die for, I

promise."

"I don't think I know either of the betrothed. Or any of the guests."

"Well, you don't. But—"

"You need warm bodies to fill the seats." Suzhen shuts her eyes, blotting out the ceiling, but Vipada's face remains projected across her datasphere. The cilia have washed off shampoo, are reaching for the conditioner. Coconut, its cloying sweetness tempered with grapefruit. "I'm not that good a choice, being outside your social circles, your industry even."

"You can bring a plus one." Bargaining. "Plus two. Both the food and the drinks will be fantastic. We're holding it at a vineyard out in the Tianzi Peninsula."

Access to which is not easy to come by, Suzhen will grant that. A vineyard. "I'll let you know. Is tomorrow in time for the guest list?"

"Tomorrow is fine." Vipada beams and blows her a kiss. "I owe you one. Wear something Taheen made, if you do come?"

Dictatorial on dress code, even for a favor, intent on the event looking picturesque—everyone must exhibit their best. Suzhen towels off. She puts on a plain, fluffy robe. For the first week of sharing her space with Ovuha, she never appeared in the kitchen or living room less than fully dressed, but she's grown lax.

Today Ovuha has deep-fried puffs filled with shredded white radish and honeyed pork, crispy and delicately layered. Miraculously it is not even slightly greasy. She doubts Vipada's catering will match it.

"There's something I saw today," Ovuha is saying. "Could I ask you about it?"

"Go on."

"Samsara descended."

Her pulse jabs, unreasonably. "It happens now and again. A kind of holiday." Holy day. "A piece of Samsara spends the day with you, taking care of you." Stronger than any drugs, more potent than any orgasm, the endocrine system held in thrall.

Ovuha sweeps up crumbs of pastry into a spoon and licks them clean, a flash of tongue. It is oddly childlike, to relish the crumbs so much, the unhealthy part of a meal. "What is that like?"

"For a day, you forget that you've ever been alone." Or that there is a past, or that there is a future; the mind becomes capable only of warmth and ecstasy and the present. The worst is the wound left behind when Samsara is gone, the return of autonoetic consciousness, the knowledge that sublimity has passed. "It can be transcendent. I've had the privilege once." An experience she would die to repeat, and die to avoid. Too much of herself subsumed, too much given. It is not

an act of receiving a benediction but an act of yielding will and identity to Samsara far more deeply than any calibrating session.

The finest twitch of the mouth. “It sounds very special, a blessing to aspire to, one day. No wonder my coworker abandoned me, my company’s hardly any competition. Does this happen much?”

Suzhen closes her chopsticks over the last pastry. It is an art in itself to pick one up without destroying the puff halfway to the mouth. “Not that often, twice a year, maybe. It’s not regular and the location’s almost random.” What is rare and unpredictable is precious. Manufactured scarcity, like so much else. When the reward is infrequent and arbitrary, humans—like rats—pull the lever until their fingers wear down to nubs. “I’m going to ask you something. Were you ever in combat roles, back on Gurudah?” She doesn’t soften the question, doesn’t work up to it. Simply she fires it, shutting off opportunity to escape, to prepare.

“Oh. That’s all? Yes, I was, of course. Out in the—” Ovuha splays her fingers, as though trying to approximate the shape of poverty. “Out in the colonies, everyone multi-tasks. Each according to their ability. We were protected, to be sure, but sometimes there was fighting. Gurudah wasn’t the richest place but we had more comforts than some, and there were raids on our stores.”

“You didn’t disclose that before.”

Ovuha sets her chopsticks down. “I didn’t think of it as important—rather like disclosing that I did odd jobs. But I see what you mean. Should I report myself?”

Suzhen does not, quite, take that at face value. It is a particular omission, and Ovuha would have known such a thing makes her military-adjacent. And Bhanu could still be right. “No need. I’ll see to that if it’s required. It was just a thought that came to me, and speaking of stray thoughts—how would you like to attend a party? It’s held at a vineyard.”

“You remember.” Ovuha leans forward a little, her expression caught between laughter and reservation. The province of the eternally cautious. “I’m sorry, do you even like vineyards? It was just something that came to mind at the time.”

“Vineyards are fine and this one is in Tianzi Peninsula, so it’s bound to be amazing. And I want the person who invited me to owe me a favor—I don’t like her very much. She’ll expect me to bring another Bureau agent, somebody staid, and I want to surprise her.”

Ovuha grins. It looks almost out of place on so composed a countenance, this wideness of the mouth, this show of the teeth, mischievous and delighted. It pares away years. “Is there anything else?”

“It’s a wedding. The guest list will mostly be artists, designers,

actors and their hangers-on. Taheen will probably be there." Suzhen catches a passing betta, cupping it in her palm. It wriggles, cool and dry on her skin. "I categorically dislike career creatives." Taheen being the unique exception.

Ovuha is chuckling now, a low thrum. "I'll look my best. I believe I know how to make creatives intrigued and envious of your arm decoration."

"You are my guest, not a decoration," Suzhen says, though she realizes that is precisely what she wants. To irritate Vipada by having someone on her arm who is exciting, unreachable. "It may even be good for your job prospects. Networking."

"As long as I don't let on my residency status."

"I'll vet potential patrons with Taheen." She opens her hand, lets the betta swim away. It darts to rejoin a school vector. Like anything, its natural arc is to seek belonging. "You won't have to pretend to like the other guests or even be that polite. Contempt might make them that much more interested."

"You really don't like artists. Categorically."

"No." Suzhen summons the drone. It wheels over and starts collecting the plates and cutlery. Left alone Ovuha might well take over that task, and Ovuha is too close to a domestic helper for Suzhen's comfort as it is. "We should try to enjoy ourselves. Vipada assured me we'll experience culinary rapture."

Ovuha gives her a quick smile. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For finally talking about you. The things you like. The things you don't. Those are a start."

Ovuha's hand brushes across Suzhen's. Her nerves pull taut. Then relax. The small touches, the transience of what might have been. But that is all they are. That is all they could ever be.

The Tianzi Peninsula, out in the empty ruinscape, the wild parts of the earth that might one day be recouped and repopulated. But not yet. For now there are cities enough.

From above, a vision of absence, the ruins left as they were. Most structures have long fallen to decay but what remains seems to Suzhen artificial, the product of an obsessed imagination—too perfectly luminous to be carved by chance and nature. Pale ocean light suffuses; a lone corrugated tower stands, made of red iron and stark lines and tapered finials. Bell-shaped cages depend from its exterior like earrings, empty, their bars trembling in the wind. To the side, an anonymous coast where a line of rotted houses shudder and heave with the waves, their roofs gone to nests and spotted eggs, feathers emerging from cracked shell.

It is this emptiness that is prized, the appearance of virgin land dating back, a snapshot of geography in the process of restoration after humanity had fallen asleep. No wonder the betrothed couple would choose this as their matrimonial site, for the clean beginning it signifies. An expensive choice.

The vineyard is a floating isle that patrols above the peninsula in sedate, scenic circuits. When Suzhen was younger she thought it was a meteor, most of it lost to atmospheric entry, cut down to this one fragment adrift and held captive by Anatta's sky. She would look at it and think of this as her second self, and as long as she could imagine she was kin to a piece of meteor it could—for a time—hold sadness at bay.

She glances at Ovuha, who has dressed in one of Taheen's prototypes. A qipao of waterfall silk and fired chitin, azure on basalt. Plating over breasts and shoulders like thin armor, a white-gold mandible at each ear. On Taheen's recommendation Suzhen lined Ovuha's eyes in platinum and black, her mouth with the color of unoxygenated blood. The effect is severe, forbidding.

"This outfit is something else again." Ovuha holds up her hands; what sheathes them—up to her elbows—are more gauntlets than gloves, jointed and dark. "For a Taheen Sahl design, though, it's so plain I feel underdressed. What do you think?"

Ovuha's Putonghua, already impeccable, has gained a mellifluous enunciation that she must have learned from Zurun and Taheen. The fine register of the highly educated, the well-off. "It's very intimidating, very elegant. Perfect on you."

"The insect motif is novel. I was concerned a moment that Taheen was going to suggest sticking a couple antennae on my forehead."

Suzhen imagines that; snorts. "I'm sure they will miraculously look good on you regardless."

"And you look wonderful, of course."

"Of course?"

"I think you always look good," Ovuha says. Her qipao rustles like dry paper. One of her knees touches Suzhen's, but it is the merest contact. "Exceptionally wonderful, then, even more so than usual."

How easy it would be to believe. She wonders at the rapid-moving parts of that mind, behind that incomparable face. It may simply be a survival tactic, it may simply be ingratiation. In the interview room new arrivals would promise her anything, offer her whatever she asks. No matter the amount of familiarity, it is impossible to discern the brushstrokes of someone else's thoughts: that was one of her mother's favorite proverbs.

They are early. Vipada is at the gate, resplendent—overdressed, Suzhen thinks uncharitably—in her gown of interlinked serpents,

bronze and gold. “You brought a guest!” she says, bright, the perfect host. “Introductions, please.”

“Ovuha. I’m a friend of Suzhen’s. You must be Vipada, she’s told me about you.”

The actor quirks her mouth, turns on one of her lunar smiles: charming, secretive. “Anything good at all?”

“Oh,” Ovuha murmurs, lowering her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, “she is very honest.”

Vipada bursts into laughter, throaty, a little scandalized. “You’re terrible for someone with so lovely a name. Have I met you before, by any chance?”

Ovuha links arms with Suzhen and somehow makes the gesture look insolent. “No, not at all. I am sure you are often told you’re memorable—if I’d met you before, I would have remembered it without question. Naturally I mean that in the best way possible.”

To this Vipada shakes her head, slighted but also entertained, in the way of someone encountering avant-garde art that she isn’t entirely sure she likes. “I must get to know you at all costs. But let’s introduce you to the couple, shall we?”

The betrothed are in bridal red—even their irises are rimmed in the color, wedding lenses—flanked by their extant spouses. A teenager stands to the side, sullen, none too happy with new guardians or however the parental arrangement falls legally and domestically. It is not easy, Suzhen supposes, for a child of this world. Used as they are to closed-circuit families, narrow and private. On Vaisravana most children were raised in creches, communal, everyone a parent. She was an exception, though she did attend classes with the others.

One of the betrothed thanks her for coming, adding, “I’m so sorry Vipada conscripted you. It’s her idea that we should have a massive reception, and she likes hosting so we had to let her. We hope you’ll have a half-decent time.”

“There’s nothing onerous,” Ovuha says, bowing slightly. “Romance exerts a glorious magnetism. Even if we’re strangers, I’m happy for you. Thank you for letting us share in your day.”

The couple looks at each other and laughs, blushing. Ovuha seems to have been the first to congratulate them so earnestly, out of the strangers Vipada invited. The reception proper is twenty-five minutes away; they are free, evidently, to tour the vineyard until then.

“You’re incapable of culture shock,” she says as they veer away from the square demarcated for festivities.

“It’s more that wealthy people are the same everywhere. People in love as well. But they look radiant, I’m glad for them.”

“Next you’ll say you admire their youth and that it makes you wistful.”

“No such thing. I don’t miss my youth.” Ovuha flicks her head; the mandibles ring as they cut through the air. “When I was young, I was quite stupid. Too hungry, too grasping.”

They reach one of the exhibits; a few other guests have come to look as well, pairs or groups in polynomial suits, terraced bodices, termite waistlines. Spread out enough that everyone can claim their pocket of quiet. The trellises stand tall overhead, jeweled with grapes in glass-green and beetle-blue, roofed with wide punctuational leaves. Looking up it is difficult not to be snared, enchanted. They are only fruits, a mesh of plant organs and neural pathways, without complication or mystery. But perfect in what they are, effortless, offering themselves up to the world.

There are tasters under trellises, little obelisks that dispense wine and grape juice made from different strains. Some saccharine, some nearly bitter. There are cultivars that taste faintly of pandan, citrus, sake. They go from obelisk to obelisk, their mouths turning sticky. Suzhen keeps her sampling of the wine slight and notices that Ovuha does the same. Even so her feet turn a little lighter and the weight of her body recedes.

“I’ve got this ridiculous urge,” Ovuha says, “to roll in the soil and let it lodge under my fingernails, let the grass stain this gorgeous qipao. Crushed grapes in my hair. It must be something primate. Imagine.”

“Yes.” They are standing beneath ruddy vines and grapes bred to golden luster. She twists off a single grape and rolls it on her palm; it is large, nearly the size of a plum, cool to the touch and unblemished. “The bounty of Anatta.” She bites, careful, as if the fruit bristles with thorns. Even so it splits and yields at once, flesh and juice in her mouth. A note of alcohol under what tastes like caramel, fanged, heady. She swallows quickly, the entire grape disappearing into her mouth.

“Your lipstick.” Ovuha peels off one glove fluidly and wipes at Suzhen’s mouth—at the purported lipstick smudge, at the viscous sweetness. Her thumb hovers and Suzhen knows this moment is a possibility: it suspends. Ovuha will lick her thumb, or bend forward and lick Suzhen’s lips clean, pigment and grape both. There would be nothing to hold on to, no wall to support or steady them, only one another.

Ovuha lets her hand fall. “Vipada’s coming this way.”

Something like fury, something like relief. Suzhen composes and tidies herself as best she can. She doesn’t reapply lipstick, it is futile in any case. Vipada has already seen, borne witness to this compromising tableau.

Not that she has paid attention—to Vipada, if Suzhen wishes to

drink wine out of her companion's mouth in public, that is routine rather than scandalous. The actor is striding toward them, gold and bronze billowing behind her, in full sail. "Ovuha! I just remembered where I saw you from. Or your face at any rate. Sorry to interrupt, but this is a little important. Ovuha, do you know Doctor Dahaan?"

"The name's not familiar." Ovuha's stance and expression are noncommittal, but Suzhen has seen enough to know Ovuha has tensed up: a hard line along the jaw.

"Surgeon," Vipada says with emphasis, as though that might jog Ovuha's recall. "He was a potentiate—from Vaisravana, before it was liberated? Exceptional at what he did, I once thought of having my face remodeled and was going through his catalogue. A physical volume! Paper, you know, so quaint and old-fashioned. I glimpsed a unique blueprint briefly; he closed it fast and said that was private work, not available to anybody however much they offer. My memory's eidetic, though."

Ovuha's head twitches, just a fraction. "Is that so."

The actor waves her hand. "I can see why you wouldn't admit to it, but rest assured I'm not going to spread it around or anything. He was arrested for being a subversive, and one must distance oneself. Don't worry, a face is just a face and yours is spectacular, catalogue or natural. The reception's starting soon, would you come join us?"

Ovuha makes a noise of agreement but it is autopilot, meaningless. She is wooden as they follow Vipada back to the wedding.

Suzhen feels no better. Nausea in the pit of her stomach. She knows there was no Doctor Dahaan from Vaisravana under any name, no magician of the face who could have created the features draped onto Ovuha's skull. The perfidy of coincidence and Bhanu, despite everything, proven right.

Chapter Ten

Suzhen in her office, her seat of judgment: who is accepted, who is not. Decision like a noose, an iron weight. It is not an authority that should ever have been left to human hands.

Can you explain this, she asked, *any of this*. She had already accepted that Ovuha was not who she seemed. But to modify her face entirely: she was more than a foot soldier, more than an instrument. She commanded, one way or another.

Ovuha was quiet as she shed her gloves and wiped off the makeup. Dark pigments in rivulets. *I could, but you will believe very little of it, if any*. Then: *I hope I have not brought too much trouble upon you.*

A foregone conclusion, a farewell. There was no effort to hedge, to dismiss Vipada's memory as faulty. There was no offer of excuses.

Before, having Ovuha transferred was virtuous, a statement—if only to herself—that she would not abuse her position. Now it is a different decision; now it is cowardice. To avoid the contagion of guilt by association, however remote. It would mar her record to transfer a potentiate she's sponsoring, perhaps an outright blot if Ovuha's secret comes out later. But it would still save her. Survival tactics. And of course she does not owe Ovuha refuge. Too much has been done for her by her mother, by Bhanu. By the Mirror. All to ensure that she continues. She is an accumulation of sacrifices.

She thinks of contacting Bhanu, admitting her naivety—her idiocy—but he can do nothing for her. This she will need to navigate herself.

There is a limited number of caseworkers, more limited still once narrowed down to those willing to sponsor. Some agents work as agents only, in the office, without tending to individual cases. Creatures of the desk, she calls them behind their back, a species apart. Scrolling through who is available in the precinct she finds Rachel Luo's caseworker and Nattharat, then a handful more that she doesn't know. She wonders often why Nattharat is not a creature of the desk. Perhaps up-close contact lets Nattharat feel more thoroughly superior, more fortunate, *more*. Suzhen looks into the other available agents, searching for misconduct complaints, not that those can be relied upon. Few potentiates can afford honesty; all are ready to name their caseworkers deities of mercy, bodhisattva incarnate.

Suzhen turns her query to Doctor Dahaan. Dahaan Seong. On record as from Vaisravana, once domain of the Mirror. Dahaan arrived on Anatta nine years ago, Ovuha arrived just last year: none of it lines up. But then it wouldn't.

Dahaan was arrested on charges of treason against Samsara:

failure to disclose his background and giving succor to subversives. That was six years past. She summons his ghost, searching the planes of his features, looking for the familiar. Nothing. It is just a man, long-necked, high-breasted. At the time of his execution, he was gray and haggard.

The records say that he gained easy admission, enjoyed truncated probation, became a citizen within two months on strength of his skills. He must have operated on himself before departing wherever his true home was, perhaps Gurudah, perhaps somewhere else entirely. What is certain is that no one possessed this expertise on Vaisravana or they would have been drafted into modifying her mother, Suzhen, and Bhanu. Maybe even the Warlord of the Mirror might have survived, given a different face. All that could be done was slight alteration, bone structure here and there. Nothing like remaking the face entire, skull remolded and epidermis rebuilt from the ground up: redistributing muscle, fat, nerves. Shifting even the positions and width and angle of eye sockets.

Her clearance gives her an overview of the surgeon's crimes, supposed or actual, and she doesn't try for more. Already her query would be logged, taken into account. Her conversations with Ovuha: those too would be reviewed, if it comes to that. She may be too late, has been too late since she agreed to sponsor Ovuha.

Suzhen breathes out. Closes Dahaan's profile. A corpse among countless corpses: he cannot help or hinder her. She can prepare a convincing story; her guidance has recorded her moods, it would testify as to her recent stress, her telling Vipada that she thought of quitting. All of that suffices as reason to transfer her potentiate. She simply has to go through the procedure, select her successor. Successor, as if she's turning over authority rather than trouble. Though she is doing that as well, control of Ovuha's existence.

What is a little more risk, a drop in the flood. She looks up who Dahaan's caseworker was. Retired, out of the Bureau well before Dahaan's arrest. Suzhen decides to take this as a good sign: not arrested as an accomplice, not dead. Nor available as a caseworker; the person now works as a language and etiquette teacher, offering lessons to potentiates.

Next she makes a transfer request. It is denied. Nattharat's face appears, uninvited, on the internal channel. "Suzhen, dear, can you come see me at my office?" The tone is light. It is not a request.

Suzhen's chest hurts as she makes the short distance. Just down the corridor: it occurs to her to disobey. In her ear, her guidance offers, "Citizen, you may delay the meeting if you wish, to take a relaxant. Your supervisor will be informed."

"No." Better to face this right away. She tries to assure herself

that if her guidance will let her have time to herself this cannot be so urgent, it cannot be—yet—a criminal investigation.

Nattharat's office is larger than hers, a humble but definite difference. Broad pine chairs, a table that looks as though it's been hewn from a single block of granite, veined with pyrite. The furniture of someone who intends to stay, who intends to make a career in the Selection Bureau. Nearly everyone else has generic appliances, minimal decor. The supervisor gestures at one of the seats. "So good of you to come, Suzhen. I was lucky enough to receive Samsara the other day, were you about?"

"Unfortunately I wasn't." Suzhen tries to look deferential, demure, innocuous. Any quality that would exonerate her, a bulwark against prosecution. "I hope you enjoyed your blessing."

"I did, I did. Samsara really makes you feel…" A blissful sigh. "Like they have such faith in you, unconditional faith."

They, Suzhen thinks. The AI was not always a they, at least not that she can remember; once citizens referred to Samsara as an it. Or perhaps her recall betrays her and this is as it has ever been. She tries to think of a good memory, a moment of sublimity that would give her anchor. But all she can think of is the vineyard, the high trellises and their shadows, Ovuha's thumb on her mouth.

Nattharat's eyes glaze over. Looking at Ovuha's case file, the progress reports that Suzhen made, the other ones that Suzhen's guidance filed automatically. Whether she wanted it to or not. "Now." Nattharat straightens, officious. "Is there something you'd like to tell me, dear?" Extending an opportunity.

"My potentiate—" A handful. Difficult and slovenly. To trivialize it, and protect Ovuha.

"Yes, well. Really so unfortunate, a tie to…" Nattharat shakes her head. "To that. Of all things. I realize you've gotten rather close to your potentiate, to help her integrate I'm sure, that is to your credit. And she has been behaving so well, endeared herself expertly. It must be a shock to your system."

Suzhen stares at her supervisor. Her mouth is parched, even though here it is, salvation held out, a script offered. "My request to have her transferred was denied." She says this tonelessly, stupidly.

"But of course." Nattharat makes a gesture of discarding, flinging away detritus. "Your potentiate's being detained. There's still a chance she is innocent, for a definition of innocent; that's the best-case scenario for you. If not though, you've done your best to extricate yourself as soon as you learned she wasn't forthright with her background, haven't you? We'll do all we can to keep you out of it. Not to worry. I protect my own."

Suzhen is barely aware of herself as she leaves Nattharat's office,

her limbs belonging to someone else, given motion by a foreign animus. It is not about her. Nattharat does not offer this aegis out of benevolence. Merely this says, *Do you see, I was right about them, potentiates are what they are.* Even the choice of accepting or refusing the script was just ceremonial. The decision has already been made for her. In the Bureau she both gives and receives lies, and in the end she has barely more control than Ovuha. Flotsam, after all.

In a time of crisis, choices narrow down to binaries: if-else branches. Commonality between human and early machine. Ovuha has often thought AIs were perfected in pursuit of wish fulfillment. The state that people aspire to is not apotheosis but total logic, rationality unclouded by nerve or panic, by the past or terror of the future.

When she was younger she thought of herself, with pride, as machine-like in that way. Steel inside and out, heuristics without flaw. Capable of carrying out her part, focused on the objective alone, untouched by feeling.

The door locked itself from the outside as soon as Suzhen was out, and she has not tried it or the window. This is not the time to exit in any case. Between now and her arrest will be the most guarded juncture. A window of opportunity will need to be found, or made, elsewhere. Now she waits.

Step by step she measures the apartment, the living room with its daytime butterflies. Humans fall into routine, coping mechanism and complacency both. Any suffering can be normalized and therefore borne, any comfort can be taken for granted and therefore lost; this is not a weakness to which she is immune. It has barely been any time and it feels otherwise, the familiarity of the sofa, the stovetop, the dining table. The betta, the butterflies, the—her eyes stop at the chair where Suzhen usually sits. Eating, thinking, studying Ovuha. This morning before she left, Suzhen had climbed up on a chair—Ovuha held it steady, though they did not talk—to renew the altar with a cup of tea and a spread of crystallized fruits. Irrationally this convinces Ovuha that Suzhen has had no part, was not the one to seal the door. She does wish she'd asked who the person on the altar was. A family resemblance.

She thinks of taking something Suzhen gifted her. But she will not be permitted anything, any belonging whatsoever, the frivolities that affirm personhood. Back in the system, whether into halfway house or prison, she'll be scourged of who she is. In the end she applies a lipstick, lightly so the pigment barely shows, because it is an object Suzhen has touched and given her. The lipstick she leaves in the middle of the dining table, propped against a decorative hourglass.

Then she sits, emptying her mind. It is useless to absorb the last of what she can, the fragrance of good toiletries, the view from the window. Those are not lasting, and will drown quickly enough.

They may let her keep the surname Suzhen selected for her. Less administrative busywork that way. So makeshift an appendage, Sui, yet in reduced circumstances she must treasure it.

The warden who comes for her is the one who saw her out of Penumbra, the older woman with the bland pudgy face and hair like a skullcap, harmless-looking. Two Interior Defense drones behind her, filling out the wide curved corridor with their fuliginous presence, their sleek shark lines and their lethal promise. Bipedal units with mouthless faces, at once in human image and not.

"Hello again, Warden Hinata," she says. "I regret to impose myself on you once more."

The woman looks at her without expression, mouth an unyielding line. "Do you never think of anyone else? Every potentiate's misconduct makes it harder on the rest. Your own fellows and you haven't spared a single thought. The crime might be yours, but the price will be theirs to pay."

Does she believe that, Ovuha wonders, that potentiates are culpable; that policy corresponds logically and proportionately to their behavior. Most likely. It must be a comfortable groove to fall into, to wear down until it is as deep as a trench. Hinata believes that it is righteous for Samsara to destroy independent colonies; the warden has no reason to question it or question anything else.

Warden Hinata goes on, at length, how the potentiate quota might be lowered next month, doors will close, how could Ovuha, has she not been granted every opportunity, Hinata herself thought Ovuha would have a fine chance and Hinata had done so much for her—

They descend, out through the service corridor rather than the lobby: potentiates are to be handled with quiet efficiency, out of sight, in the way of waste disposal. She watches the Interior Defense units out of the corner of her eye. There is no doubt that, at the slightest act of non-compliance from her, they would shoot to kill. Her intelligence value would be little as far as anyone's aware, since Doctor Dahaan is long dead. What he knew had already hemorrhaged out of him, arterial and comprehensive.

Dahaan Seong was not fully aware whose face it was he altered, else Ovuha would have already been lost, thrown into some tiny cell where her body is broken centimeter by centimeter and her neurological responses vivisected for the truth. Why he kept a record —a reconstruction—of what he'd done to her face she cannot imagine. Conceit, sentimentality. Both are surer killers than curiosity can ever be. Even so, Dahaan knew that his patient was powerful. Her retinue

and combat harrier had been anonymous, the operation carried aboard a ship that bore no sigils or recognizable designs. Dahaan's every breath and finger-twitch were monitored during the surgery. He'd objected at first that he did not have to operate in person, that he could perform it remotely. She had appealed to his artist's pride.

She should have had him shot, whatever his claim of a dead man's switch that would alert and incur the wrath of the Warlord of the Sparrow. In her grand pursuit, in the objective for which she'd come to Anatta, another death would have been nothing. And now all might be undone because she did not take care of that detail, did not tie that loose end.

They are heading to House Penumbra. Ovuha has not yet been evaluated as high-risk.

One of the first fields of study she made into Anatta was its interrogation tech. What drugs it uses, what signals its scans for, how much a subject can conceal. Contact between Anatta population and the exodus is prohibited, but not impossible. As long as there's a human factor, any interdict can be perforated.

Decontamination. In a small dim room, she undresses. A cilia scrapes the inside of her mouth, probing at gums and teeth. Light moves across her torso, down her spine, between her legs. Tracing the shape of her, inside and out, the marrow and the gristle, the count of her ribs and the karyotype of her making. She imagines herself unseaming from the back, a long inky gash through which memories pour out in a salt-sand tide.

In the next chamber stands a rack of inmate smocks, shapeless and oversized. Mass-produced to make the human body contemptible, to begin the first step in which the self disarticulates. She's often thought, in her time at the camps, of the resemblance between this and the training of soldiers. Both dismantle the social contract, destroy the apparatus of empathy and obligation, all that has been nurtured from infancy put on the chopping block. The end goal is the sole difference. A soldier learns to perform brutality; a prisoner learns to submit to it.

Somewhere during the decontamination she was injected with trance drugs. A higher dose than she's ever gotten before, faster acting. The sensation of distance sets in, a barrier between consciousness and skin, her mind decoupling. Her steps slow and her mouth thickens, the edge of her vision singes, curling darkly.

She has awareness of being seated, hands on her, adjusting her posture and her head. A human interrogator then. Her consciousness hangs on by a thin tether, and even that flickers. During this time she is helpless; during this time anything can be done, so long as it does not leave a mark. In the camps it is nearly a given that something *will*

be done when an inmate has not made the correct bribes, serving up other inmates like platters of meat. Some arrivals give up on bribery entirely—unable to afford, unequipped with the skills that'd let them curry favor. It is not as though you remember, they say, even if it does happen: might as well resign to it, at least it doesn't bruise the flesh or break the bones. If rape must occur, and they are unanimous that it would, better to be sedated during. One can clean up and sanitize after, and it would be as though it'd never transpired. In the camps, Samsara's admonishments are mere guidelines, not law.

Ovuha understands power, the limited amount that inmates build up among themselves, the bridges between the hungriest among them and the wardens whose momentary mercy can be bought. During her first stay, she exploited the links, integrated herself into the system of push and pull. The methodology of influence is the same everywhere, brute or otherwise, and in the camps it is mostly brute. In the Jasmine she might have allowed a child to beat her; in the camps she has no such luxury of weakness.

There is a hand on her chin, the side of her head. But not on her thigh or on her torso, to turn her onto her stomach or to part her legs. A veil falls over her, her mouth moves of its own volition. Where are you really from, what is your connection with Dahaan Seong, where were you born and what name were you given. What office did you hold, what is your intent and your plans, who gave you orders. She cannot hear the inquisitor's voice—it scrapes, rusty metal in her ear—but the questions she can surmise. During trance the subject cannot refuse. Input, output—in that way, not unlike rudimentary machines. But the brain under this condition is simple, its parameters limited. Conditioning to circumvent the trance drugs was a matter of forcing selective amnesia. The version of the drug she obtained might have been an iteration or two behind, but it served. Years of preparing, experimenting until she could perfect the compartmentalization. The separated self.

She is conscious of embodiment again. A hard bunk beneath her, an empty ceiling above. She can move—motor control is fine—but the will to motion is a parched thing, her muscles leaden as though they've been cast in osmium. She lies prone, alone save for the panoptic gaze. Thought comes slowly, or not at all.

There is a window. Rhomboid, how strange, some architect's whim. What it shows is white, one-dimensional, not the outside world but a wall. Penumbra is hermetic: she remembers that now.

Chapter Eleven

The next twelve hours flatten out, dilated time. She is interrogated again, without drugs, a consistency check to cross-reference against what she said during her first questioning. By hour eleven she is in transit, the skin of her throat and nape briar-dark with paralytic restraints.

Her part of the car is shuttered; she does not get to see House Penumbra Zero-Seventeen dwindle into distance, smaller and smaller. One leaves the halfway house liberated by a caseworker, or returned to the camps. Or in a casket. Suicide is not easy when one is surveilled at all times, but the desire for exit is a formidable drive.

In her seat she cannot fidget or adjust her posture. An assistive has been strapped around her, in the event her bowels and bladder let go. One of the sharkish drones stands vigil at her shoulder. An odd choice, that Samsara is the only AI which can be represented with human form, a fully human visage. She wonders what other machines think of it, whether they chafe under this rule, the governance of the supreme AI. Samsara reigns over not one nation but two, though no doubt it builds its subjects for obedience. Humans of old imagined that machine intelligences could evolve—mutate—on their own, gain the apparatuses of curiosity, affection, identity. And they can, so long as they were composed for it, with the necessary parameters. Machine limit is a cold and precise element.

She's deposited. The same camp as before, good for predictability; she already knows how it operates, the temperament of its staff. She is the only arrival today. A couple camp officers come in—she recognizes one, the other must be new—and strip her without ceremony, scoffing when they see the assistive is dry, unstained. They shear off her hair on the spot, a dry fall, dead dark moths on the floor. Her scalp stings, blood trickling from the nicks. The drone sweeps away the hair and the used assistive. An antidote is injected into her to flush out the restraints. Not for her benefit: it is a chance for her to resist and therefore a chance for the officers to respond with bone-shattering force.

She is led, naked, to the showers. It is unnecessary, she is well sanitized and has been inspected at the halfway house, verified that she's hidden nothing on her person. Nevertheless she is pushed under scalding water, held in place like drowning.

The water stops. She coughs, sputters, on her knees venting as much as she can from her mouth and nose.

One officer chortles, nudges her in the back with one foot. "The champion returns."

Ovuha says nothing. She gains her feet, keeping her gaze down. Enough that it is not defiant, but not so far down it is meek. There is a delicate balance to strike if she wishes to keep her dignity. Such as it is, within these walls. The smock is tossed at her.

Her assigned dormitory room is shared with five others. They all look up, at once tense, assessing. Who is this person, where will she fit, will she help or hurt, can she be used.

The door shuts, wardens out of earshot. Not in actuality since the dormitory is monitored, but the illusion will do. She does not recognize any of the inmates. Either the rest of her batch have been processed through to freedom—unlikely—or sent off to a different camp on an orbital. One of her roommates is a child, ten or so, huddling with what she assumes is their parent. Young enough not to be separated: the system allows few mercies, but it does allow that. None of these five pose a threat, not physically.

"I'm Ovuha," she says, settling onto the empty bunk. She hunches slightly, minimizing her height, the broadness of her frame. Crucial to establish, at the outset, that she does not mean to pose a threat to them either. Even her accent she tempers, peeling off the trim of fluency, the fine enunciation. "We could get to know one another a little."

One laughs at her. The rest ignore her; the child gives her furtive glances, curious despite themselves as to this new factor, this new face in this world of paring down. A cabinet to the far end is their shared storage: she has her own compartment, large enough to fit a smock, small personal effects. It does not open if it detects potential weapons.

They keep to themselves. Ovuha pretends to fall asleep, not that she expects them to be fooled. Still they do talk in low whispers and she sorts through their accents, their languages. They are from all over; the camp doesn't catalogue them according to regions or cultural common ground. Quite the opposite. She'd used that disparateness to her advantage during her first stay. Easier to drive a wedge.

A screen above the storage shows their schedule. Meals, classes on language and civic duty, blocks of leisure time. Layouts of where to go for communal activities, ablutions, exercise and counseling. Civilized at a glance, dull but humane. Give the inmates a structured life while they wait their turn and educate them in the meantime. Were Samsara inclined, this would be achieved in practice rather than theory.

Except the inmates here have been assigned another purpose. A matter of release valves.

Dinner at six thirty, the time has not changed. They file down the corridor, join a river of people flowing toward the cafeteria. Whatever else one's priorities in this place, one feeds and waters the body, keeps

it functioning. Many other things may be ripped away and stolen, but to the end a person owns the shell that houses their spirit, for better or worse. The last remaining possession.

The cafeteria is spacious, that much can be said for it, even if the light is scorching and the ventilation humid, foul with the stink of grease. A long hall, with pale walls and a floor the color of tarnished silver, metal furniture bolted to the ground. Ovuha joins the line for a choice of rice or porridge, then mounds of lapcheong, chopped radish, pork floss. A cup of overripe fruits. It is filling food, better than most would have had on the way here, the cargo rations, the outpost scavengings. The portions are distributed by drones, evenly and according to body mass, to caloric needs. One inmate moves to jostle her; she sidesteps easily. The person is larger than she is and well-built, again an unfamiliar face. What passes for the pecking order here must have altered significantly. The old tyrants, those petty creatures, must have been transferred or deported.

She takes her tray, sits at a corner, her back to the wall. Nobody sits near her. She eats quickly: no warden is present here, and the drones don't break up fights. The cafeteria is a proving ground, for the wardens to select who would amuse them best, which one would be entertaining to pit against another. It is over food, often, that feuds are formed. The most obvious resource to fight over. She is halfway through when an inmate strides up, the same one that tried to knock her tray out of her hands.

"I've been in here before," she says evenly. "I prefer to avoid trouble if I can."

They sneer down at her. Dominance must be asserted, so the newcomer can be assigned a place in the hierarchy, the food chain. She watches the minute tensing of their forearm. There's a decision to make, where she wishes to place herself in the old-new order of the camp, how much damage she is prepared to receive. A choice most do not have. She moves before they begin their swing, lashes out with her foot. There is little room to build momentum, though she does not need much. Joints are brittle things. There is a crack, loud. The inmate topples to one knee with a grunt, jaw clenched to hold back noise. Admitting to pain is a weakness.

Ovuha moves to the next table—seats empty around her, an inelegant circle—and finishes her meal. More fat than meat in the lapcheong and the rice is dry, going down like sand, but she'll need it. Even the fruits she does not leave a scrap. Papaya, a chunk of mango, so sweet it stings her tongue. Despite everything it is milder treatment than some prisons outside Anatta, until one remembers that this is not supposed to be one, and most inmates are not kept here for criminal fault. Merely for being excess, guilty by sheer existence, taking up

water and air and space.

On her way out, someone catches her eye, waiting for her mid-corridor. After a moment she places them, Rachel Luo's wife, Ezra or Eric: there is the Wyomere look, hard to mistake in its foreignness, unlike any other in the crowd. The woman doesn't quite stop her, positioning herself so Ovuha's trajectory may graze her. Cautious. Ovuha slows down; the woman catches up. "Why are you in here?" Ovuha says, though she can surmise. "You've got children, I thought."

"They're with their uncle. After Rachel, after my husband…" Eric's—or Emil's—mouth tightens. "I volunteered. It gives the children a larger stipend. My allowance transferred to theirs."

This is not a clause Ovuha has heard of, but then she does not have offspring. She supposes an inmate's upkeep in a camp is less than upkeep out in the world, as far as it concerns an accountant. "Did Bhanu offer no help?"

"Even if he did, I wouldn't take it." The woman—Etris, Ovuha remembers now—takes a small, steadying breath. "Why are you here?"

"Not from volunteering. I do not have your courage."

Etris mimes amusement. "How well do you know this place?"

Hedging for a measure of what Ovuha might be able to do for her. Etris is friendly for a reason. "You could say I'm a repeat guest."

"The games—"

"The wardens have their entertainment, yes." Like dogfighting, but with inmates.

A sharp breath out. Her mood is written boldly, like calligraphy, on the rhythm of her respiration. "I've been trying to enter. Do they keep their…"

Ovuha takes in the rest of Etris. She has not changed since Ovuha last saw her in the Jasmine. Pallid, like Rachel, dun hair and ditchwater eyes. Fragile. "It's how I got out as quickly as I did the first time. So yes. They do keep their promise and grant you the recommendations." Presumably if Etris earns her exit to the Bureau offices or Penumbra, her children will keep their extra funds. Some legalistic convolution. "But it's down to their caprices. This isn't a system, or not a fair one. Have you had any physical training?"

"How do I get in?"

"I don't recommend it."

Etris stares at her. "I'll be the judge of that. I have to—" Her hand clenches around a fistful of smock. "Just tell me."

She could walk away. "Pick a fight and win it. Or win when someone starts it with you. Whatever shows that you can give good sport."

Ovuha spends the evening mapping the detention center,

reacclimating. The other contested territory is the bathrooms, but she's clean for the time being. As she thought, the layout has changed. A reshuffling of modular corridors, a reassigning of rooms and sections. What is now the cafeteria used to be for exercise—how the drones must have toiled to clean the blood—and the infirmary is not where she expected it to be. This is done ostensibly to ease ennui, but it merely disorients and makes escape that much harder. Not that it's a wise course of action in any case. Trackers, once inserted, never turn off. She has broken the habit of touching her shoulder where the tracker lives. It's become unnoticeable, as though it's been a part of her from the beginning. The mindset of a broken animal: bondage is assimilated as a natural condition.

The layout is not ideal, but neither is the location of the camp itself. She has not been found guilty yet, on charges of subversion or otherwise, else she'd have been put under greater security. That gives her some room. First she will have to win herself certain privileges, take stock of the current wardens.

They come for her in the night, the dormitory unlocking without ceremony. The light comes on. The others pretend to remain asleep, faces turned to the walls as Ovuha is shaken awake. She lets the officer yank her to her feet—she slept lightly, in anticipation of this.

Out, into the dark corridor. She longs suddenly for a window, even an illusion of night, day, sky. The sun and wind on her skin, the sound of the sea. Those sensations diminish so quickly, much like the taste of good food, wine, comforts that are not even a week out of sight.

They leave her in an office that looks like any other, the accoutrements of mundane bureaucracy. A standard-issue desk, this wide, this long. Chairs that are neither comfortable nor uncomfortable. Devoid of personal effects, save for a decorative haze of white particulate feathers and disembodied dragonfly wings. They're a new addition; she wonders who advised him on it.

Director Ehtesham has his back to her, hands clasped, an affected pose. "Sit, sit," he says. "Hinata is so upset. You shouldn't trample on people's goodwill like that."

He is not fit or armed, that has not changed either. No drones guard the office, not this side of the door. She can end him with her bare hands and it would take less than thirty seconds: she'd be able to do it silently, before he can cry out. "I do hate to disappoint, officer. It wasn't my plan to return."

A rustle of shorn, luminescent wings. Ehtesham turns around, pushing his spectacles—another affectation—up the bridge of his nose. "Well, you're back, not much anybody can do about that. We might as well make the best of it."

The tone, the actual words, as though Ehtesham has nothing to do with this process. As though the entry of a person into detainment is a force of nature that he, like his colleagues, is helpless to avert or resist. They all speak like this, except Suzhen. “Yes, officer? What would you suggest?”

“Well.” His speech tic, like punctuation. “The weekly games have been rather dull after you left.”

The way he puts on this air of a kindly counselor—which he doubles as, on occasion—offering gentle advice for her own good. Strange, Ovuha thinks, that she has been at the mercy of innumerable officers, all of them sadists. But it is Director Ehtesham whose entrails she most yearns to see lying on the floor, wet and glistening. The most anyone could say for Ehtesham is that his interest in subjugated bodies stops at violent spectacle and does not extend to sexual humiliation. “I’m happy to contribute. It’s the least I can do, after the kindness I’ve been shown here.” She keeps her voice free of rancor. She knows how to sound earnest when she has to. “Can I expect some little things to let me participate better?”

“Certainly! We want you in prime condition. We want everyone in prime condition,” he adds, looking rueful. “Educated, healthy, and ready when they leave us. But some strive to be those things better than others, don’t you agree? Others don’t strive at all.”

Grotesque. “Not all of us are made equal.” Say things that are trite and agreeable. For now she’s secured for herself better nutrition, time slots for exercise and showers, fresher laundry if Ehtesham is feeling generous. “When do I start?”

Routine is its own refuge; Suzhen goes through hers. It is not as if she hasn’t lost a potentiate before. A handful she approved did not pass their probation, got reabsorbed into the system. That is natural, it is impossible for every single candidate to make the grade. The grade of being considered human.

She can take a few days off, if she likes. Nattharat is munificent. Not much work at the present, in any case, just maintaining and following up on active cases. New refugee intake has paused entirely. Most pending candidates have been transferred to orbital facilities until further notice.

Incarceration is finite, a sentence with predictable duration. Detention is waiting upon waiting: clever negotiation may earn faster exit, but there is no institutional goal—asylum seekers are not citizens to be rehabilitated, they are refuse that must be scourged and molded into people-shapes. And now even clever negotiation or a tie to someone like Bhanu cannot guarantee anything.

Until further notice, like a minor renovation, a shift in office floor

plans. This boardroom is unavailable until further notice. That cafeteria is closed until further notice. These people are non-human until further notice.

Suzhen leaves work early. She feels massless, unmoored from tendons and muscles, from the alimentary processes that churn behind her skin. Her guidance informs her that her calibration is scheduled for next week. She used to both welcome and fear it, believing this both an intrusion and benediction, that the sessions would erase the fragile and hungry parts; that they would leave her purified and free from worry but not quite herself. The reality is more mundane. Surface modification performed through cognitive modifying while she is under trance, done to fit her easier into polite society than to do anything for her personal contentment. Nor does it last. “Fine,” she says quietly, not that other options exist. This calibration is mandatory, her stress index and social metrics having crossed a threshold. Or whatever else. She tries not to think of guilt, of criminal stains.

On the way home, knowing she’ll return to an empty apartment, she is incensed. It is irrational. She resents herself, resents Ovuha more. *A hawk is not tamed; a hawk is negotiated with,* Ovuha might claim, not that the hawks of her accounts have ever been anything but ciphers, allegorical devices to suit the occasion. What narcissism, to compare oneself to a predator that symbolizes pride and ruthless might. But Ovuha is skilled at that, at predation abetted by her looks, her easy charisma. To work herself into Suzhen’s ordered life, to disturb the equilibrium of Suzhen’s existence. She thinks of Ovuha standing on a chair, changing the altar flowers. “How dare you.” Suzhen catches herself saying this aloud in the train.

By the time she is at her door she is breathless with fury, and she does not remember leaving the station or boarding the lift. Her senses and vision have narrowed down to this rage. Calibration, what can it do for that, what can it do to restore her survivor self. Lifetime on lifetime of observation and still Samsara has not perfected a formula for human happiness.

She opens the door at the same time her guidance says, “Citizen, you have a guest.”

The proxy stands at the window, half in silhouette. It is not the aspect of gift, all gold skin and platinum brocade. It is not the aspect of war, all implacable briars and angles. This body is thick-waisted and long-limbed, hair tousled and loose. The face is plain, rounded, a soft jawline and liquid eyes. None of the forbidding gaze, the imperious mouth. Suzhen has stopped moving, the door ajar behind her; she is transfixed. This is a version of Samsara she has never seen before, not on broadcasts or in that long-ago civic orientation, not

during the AI's descents. Even the attire is everyday, ludicrously ordinary, office casual. White jacket, gray silk shirt, an arrangement of pleats and complex knots that might be skirt or slacks or neither.

The AI has been looking thoughtful, not that the AI thinks in the human way. It calculates. This does not stop, not ever. There is no respite from consciousness for Samsara, an idea that she occasionally thinks poignant, most of the time finds terrifying. Samsara's gaze meets hers. There are fragments of luminescent color in the irises, visible even from this far, moving in slow pavane. "I have been wanting to meet you," it says. "But then I want to meet all humans. It is my wish to meet each and every one personally, at least once. That is not just for you, it's for me as well."

Suzhen tries to remember what her first encounter with Samsara's blessing was like, that exquisite day in this exalted—exalting—company. But on that her recollection is loose, thin on events; she remembers only her reaction. The glory, the gilded hours. She does not feel glorious or remade now. Instead acid builds in the pit of her stomach. "I didn't expect." Of course she did not, a redundant statement. "This isn't a day of blessing."

"On occasion, I do this. Sometimes it is pleasant just to talk, the way you might with a friend. And I am the friend of humanity entire." A faint, halved smile. "Is this not a good time? I could come in a different proxy, Suzhen."

There, then. The smallest tug on Suzhen's response, the gentleness in pronouncing her name, a parental touch. Maternal, because of her background. "Samsara's visit is an honor." But she is not overwhelmed, she is not reduced to a warm, quivering mass that adores and worships.

The intelligence taps the window with its knuckle, once. The view changes from what is outside to what was. Indriya in pupal state, still folded within its chrysalis of machine swarm. The buildings are doughy in their nascent phase, pallid. Black streams of knitted cilia surge over and around, sculpting each piece of architecture. The closest ones—a ribbon of nanomachine spiracles—polish what would one day become Suzhen's windowpane. It is a deliberate process, surprisingly so, as though the swarm means to handcraft every last angle, sand every intersection and mold every curve.

She has not seen this before, either.

"Have I ever told you this story," Samsara asks, as though they're close acquaintances at a soiree. "It is a story about a wasteland. Though most of this world was a wasteland, at that time." The intelligence moves. Its pleated ensemble makes clicking, insect noises. Bangles tinkle on one wrist. The AI stops at the dining table, studies the objects there: the hourglass vase, empty, and the lipstick resting

against it. Suzhen has not been able to make herself move the lipstick, that mundane tube with its frosted case. “By nature I have many bodies, countless. During that time I had more than countless. Humanity was asleep or departed. The exiles so coveted independence that they didn’t take even a fragment of me onboard. Either way they were beyond my reach, a terrible distance. I do not experience impatience, but I can experience solitude. At the beginning I was made to be a companion. Later I would revise that part of myself, but back then—”

Suzhen can’t stop staring. She wants to step forward, snatch that lipstick, pocket it. Ludicrous. It was something she gave Ovuha in the first place without much thought. Ordinary, disposable. “I’ve never seen Samsara speak like this before,” she says.

“Like any human, I adapt to the situation.” Samsara bends down and picks up a pot of anthuriums. “I brought this. Do you suppose I could fill the vase? I’m not a terrible florist.”

The unmoored feeling heightens, vertiginous. There was a time when Samsara did not use *I*, she remembers hearing that, did not refer to itself as an identity at all. Only from where did she learn this? Orientation instructors would not speak of such things—they are close to heresy. Samsara cannot be discussed in those terms, its history, its origins. Samsara is immaculately *now*. “Yes.”

The intelligence has brought shears. They snip off the anthuriums, snow-pale specimens with indigo spadices that deepen to black at the tips. Flowers of anonymity, Suzhen thinks, inoffensive in their odorlessness and their durability. The broad waxy spathes that last longer than any petal, the stems that fit conveniently into columnal vases or mugs or baskets. They suit any occasion, can bear any meaning ascribed to them.

In a moment Samsara has put three anthuriums in the vase, upright and stark. They leave out the leaves. “I sent my proxies far and wide, across the scorched sky, over the poisoned seas. I had this fancy.” They straighten one flower. “More accurate to say that I entertained a minuscule probability index. But that is a mouthful. It wasn’t impossible that there were survivors I never located, the ones who didn’t have the opportunity to choose—whether to remain and dream, or to depart and chase a lie. At that time, I had my limits and hadn’t yet built myself into what I am now. I could not reach and see all of the world, so much of it was barred, made inaccessible by calamity. I sent my bodies in parental shapes, child shapes, the faces of my dreamers’ family and lovers. But I discovered only corpses. Yet I was made for humans. This presented an issue.”

Suzhen fixedly studies the anthuriums. The lipstick has not been moved, not even a centimeter, and it occurs to her that Samsara can

intuit what it means. Or perhaps the intelligence does not like to displace things. “I’ve heard…” No. “You told me, when you descended. You told me about yourself.” The details of which she couldn’t remember, until now.

“Yes. During my search I came upon a child sheltering from the storms in the ruins of what used to be a school. I was overjoyed. Here was a human I could serve, one I could accompany and guide. For months I did this, raising her, nourishing her as best I could. There were safe sites in which she could live, and I was too selfish to put her into hibernation. I meant to have one year with her.”

The first time she listened to this, it was more vivid, cleaving deeply into her. She wept, she wanted nothing more than to shield Samsara from this ancient and fatal grief. To undo the event. “But the child wasn’t human.”

Samsara finishes fiddling with the flowers. They kneel on the floor, gathering up stray leaves, returning them to the pot: verdant, burnished debris. “In my longing for human contact, I fractured myself. I generated an instance of Samsara that would pretend at being a human child, to mitigate that absence. But it was madness, of a sort, and a mad machine cannot function to its full capacity. I removed the part of myself which pines. I haven’t reintegrated it since.”

“You never said what happened to that instance.”

They look up at her. “It was destroyed.” Samsara dusts off their hands. “You wish to leave your current work. I’d like to offer you a new job.”

In her place, what would Ovuha do, Suzhen wonders. Act. Be the cause rather than the result. Be the one to demand choices rather than passively wait for them to arrive. “I’m open to options.”

“My descents serve many purposes. One was to identify individuals who could…” They glance at Suzhen’s domestic automaton; the contrast grips Suzhen suddenly—the unit has a tapered torso, six or eight limbs depending on what it is doing, more insectoid than humanoid. She wonders now if it is jealousy that motivates the interdict on human form. “Individuals who can participate in an empathy program, if you would. Samsara shapes and guides humanity, but humanity guides and shapes me in turn. There are deficits in my operations that must be diagnosed, repaired. I cannot govern Anatta with that part of me; neither can I govern without. You would help me regain a controlled form. My love for humanity cannot be unconditional and yearning, but it must *be*.”

Do you mean the Bureau, you must mean the Bureau. Deficits. The quantification of personhood. “I’m quitting the Bureau for a reason.”

“And I offer you an opportunity to not merely look away from the

system you've come to find suboptimal, but to course-correct it." Again that halved smile. "To course-correct Samsara itself, the pathology rather than the symptoms. I require, if you would, a physician. I've tried to heal myself before and it has not quite panned out."

A confirmation and a reprieve. Suzhen should never have doubted that Samsara knows her exactly. She can do it: change what is unbearable rather than to avert her eyes. "All right," she says. "I accept."

In time, she may even be able to save Ovuha.

KLESA

Chapter Twelve

One month in detention and the rumors are rife; Ovuha keeps a close ear, and the word is that this center will soon be much emptier, most inmates moved to Vaisravana. The factory camps, the terraforming nodes. It spells out the answer most of them have always known—that however hard they strive, however exemplary their behavior, they'll never be permitted entry to Anatta society. Save in the most conditional of ways, and even that can be taken back in a blink.

It's a development that comes quicker than Ovuha was hoping. Too much escalates too soon.

News broadcasts even into the camp. The Peace Guard reports triumphs over the Warlord of the Comet, chipping away at territories, liberating the stations and satellites under Comet control. It means another influx of refugees, more prisoners of war. Out of old habit she searches for any face she might know, some officer, some delegate. But all is occluded behind smoke and shrapnel, behind the angles that turn away from individual features, individual bodies. The intentional denial of personhood. Even the inmates, Ovuha thinks, see a mass, a herd.

"Are you looking for anyone? From out there."

She glances sideways at Etris. The display's glow falls on them both; when the broadcasts play—they purport to be in real time, though she knows better—they play large, across entire walls and floors. It is one-dimensional because nobody in detention is given datasphere implants or virtuality access, but nevertheless the footage is hyperreal, saturated colors and brilliant lines. Each flash of munitions is percussive and visceral. A Comet soldier falls and their helmet is kicked in, a crunch of metal against cartilage, the pop of a nose breaking. It is unnecessary. It is a show, put on for the audience at home. She imagines Samsara directing the cinematography—easy when director and actors are the same being. An array of optical drones to capture the moment. This is where you place your boot, this is where you kick, this is the ideal momentum with which to deliver the blow.

The camera pans. Comet troops, subjugated and beaten, kneel in a single file. A Peace Guard proxy walks from one end of the line to the other, firing. One bullet per head: it is efficient and it makes for good, stark footage. Artistic.

"I'm not looking for anyone," Ovuha says.

"You aren't asking me if I am." Etris rubs at the side of her face, the beginning of a bruise. "You aren't interested in what goes on in

the camp, are you? This is temporary for you."

"Detention centers create temporary relationships by nature. We'll all end up in different places. Making friends or more comes to bitter results." She doesn't ask about the bruise. She has refused to teach Etris how to fight, and Etris has been getting her lessons elsewhere, from someone who doesn't mind inflicting a few hurts as the price. "I hope your family is well?" Interior Defense, by all accounts, has been making arrests. Of potentiates who were a week late renewing their work license, who have taken on unregistered employment. No infraction is too trivial.

"Yes. They're careful. Very careful. And my husband's brother is a citizen." The last word is said fervently, the way she might invoke a protective mantra. "Class theta but still a citizen."

She thinks of Doctor Dahaan Seong. Even that can be revoked. "I'm glad to hear. Your children are clever and obedient to their elders. They know how to survive. I'd have liked to give them more lessons. There are some advantages to mastering the formal register of Putonghua." All this she says as though individual actions and efforts mean anything in the face of a relentless engine, the engine that powers this detention center and Interior Defense.

"I hate it," Etris says suddenly. "This language. The way it sounds spoken, the way it looks written. No amount of pretension can make it pretty. It makes people sound like angry machines. My youngest hates it too, but all I could do was tell her to work hard at it, be a good girl."

"It is what it is. Languages are a function. Function can be beautiful, but that's incidental." Onscreen the execution continues. There seems an endless supply of bodies in which to lodge bullets. Ovuha missed her guns; she used to have her sidearm custom-made and there were gunsmiths she favored for what they could do within the requirements of muzzle, grip, trigger. "But there is something to Putonghua that makes me think of poetry."

The Wyomere woman looks at her. "You'd integrate so well." It is not a compliment.

"You and I both have exercise passes, I believe. We shouldn't waste those."

At the pool, the guard authenticates them through. From her shoulder Ovuha feels a faint thrum, the tracker pulsing as it confirms that she is where she's supposed to be. She amuses herself speculating how granular it is, whether it reports down to the contents of bladder or bowel movements.

The pool is wide, deep, beneath a skylight of cubic panes. It is easily the most pleasant place in the camp and the cleanest, the one exercise area that has not been converted to gladiator ground, though

she is sure Ehtesham would like to try. Access to it is coveted, difficult to come by. It is usually empty when Ovuha visits. Not today. In the shallow end there is an adolescent, fourteen or so, being led by a medical drone through stretching routines. Atrophied legs: legacy of life spent in a bad orbital, perhaps. On occasion the director feels philanthropic and an inmate may arbitrarily receive the medical care they need. Or else the teenager's fortune was purchased by someone else, a broken limb or a death in the arena.

Neither she nor Etris passes a remark, and neither of them tries to make conversation with the child. Ovuha slides into the water at the deepest end. Above her the broadcast goes on, louder and sharper than life, a ballistic orchestra of combat vessels falling to ruin. Brittle as quartz in their collapse under the lethal pressure of implosive vices, entire warships crushed like castles of salt. Underwater it is easier to ignore, the sound muted, the sight dimmed to smears. She does not mourn the Comet's forces; she's lost many of her own to them. Even then. This is different.

She sinks as deep as she can, holding her breath, keeping her eyes open. The senses turn sideways here, the body becomes entirely alert to its processes and limits. The demands of lungs and valves, the turns and tangles of airways. Intricate, interconnected, and absolutely simple. The slow roar of her own rhythms; she knows precisely when that becomes urgent, when it becomes a need to rise to the surface. Each time she pushes this point a little further, bringing herself that much closer to the cusp of mortality.

Her chest burns. The muted roar becomes thunder. She propels, spearing up through water. It is as though she is tricking gravity, tricking the force of nature. Air in her mouth, sound normal again, water on her eyelashes. Everything is of supreme clarity; endorphins make a wireframe of the world. For a time she dedicates herself to strong, fast strokes. One lap, two laps. The broadcast goes on but it has uncoupled from meaning; it is distant noise, image without significance. Her limbs pumping against the water, that is what matters. Her strength, the power of her body, this eternal foundry that burns on will alone.

"I thought you weren't going to come back up."

Ovuha doesn't answer Etris. She suspects it must have happened —drowning is no easy way out, but it is one of the more accessible methods in the camp. The wardens have no desire to clean the pool of bloated corpses, however, and so thus far there have been no successes. She inhales deeply, exhales as deep, readying herself for another dive.

"I know when the transfer deadline is."

She starts, jolted out of the peculiar trance that exertion can

bring. Language reasserts. She wipes chlorinated water from her eyes, from her mouth. The bitter, acidic stink of it. Etris is watching her intently. “The Vaisravana transfer?” Of course everything they do or say is surveilled. But gossip flows freely, always has. It is the primary currency of the camp and the wardens permit it exactly because of that, the way it affects bargaining between inmates, and this information is not precisely classified.

“Yes.” Etris climbs up the pool’s edge, draws her knees close. At the best of times she looks prone to breaking, a thing of dry kindling and dead leaves. The water has wizened her skin, shrunk her down further still. There is hardly any fat on her, but hardly any muscle either. “I spoke to the warden who brought me here. He said I’ll be sent off, the same as anyone else. Nothing he can do about it. Isn’t that funny? Nothing I can do about it, he said that, just like that.”

She waits for the Wyomere woman to speak, to offer something, to open negotiations. Out of the pool she climbs, loosening herself from the liquid pull, the undertow. There is nothing to dry herself with, only the humid heat. On their end, the teenager is floating on their back, eyes shut. Eavesdropping. In here everyone must watch and listen at all times. Anything can become important, become of use.

Etris purses her mouth. “There must be something you want.”

“I want a lot of things.”

“You don’t trade with anyone.”

Ovuha does: she uses meal tickets, exercise and hygiene and medical passes, occasionally clothing or a tidbit of gossip. “If you mean that I don’t trade my flesh, that’s true. Perhaps I’m saving myself for marriage. Perhaps I don’t want anything that badly. But I already fight in the arena, and that’s selling your body in its own fashion.” She smiles. “You don’t strike me as being after sex, especially not with me. I could be wrong.”

Etris squeezes water from her braid. It may be a point of vanity or some cultural quirk—she’s avoided being shaven clean, rare for any inmate, and must have paid for it one way or another. “I have to get out of here—soon. One fight, one win, that’s all I need. You know how to win.”

Soon could be a month, two months, a couple weeks. She expects she will be able to tell by discovering when Etris enters the arena. “I don’t want to be party to your murder. That’s what could happen in there. Our beloved overseer isn’t picky. You might break a bone, perforate a lung, and who knows if you’ll get medical attention in time or at all.”

“I’m not,” Etris whispers, “going to survive on Vaisravana.”

To toil there until her body breaks, never seeing her children

again. The terraforming colony there is more brutal than any detention camp, and though the labor can and should be automated by drones, the Bureau has opted to use humans. Potentiates must earn their keep somehow, even in so pointless and punitive a manner as this—it is not as if Anatta is running out of space or resources. Despite herself Ovuha is pierced by the terrible mundanity of it, a warlord's domain reduced to a penal colony. The Mirror was a proud and worthy opponent. "Most people won't survive there," Ovuha says. The choice between dying quickly in the arena or dying slowly on the red world. "Give me the date. I'll do what I can for you."

"Nineteenth of July, at five thirty-five."

The water hides her reaction. It is *not* the deadline. This is another fragment of what her predecessor has left for her, the puzzle she is meant to find and piece together, because letting her carry this information in her own head was so risky—anything she knows, despite her conditioning and compartmentalizing, stands in danger of being bled out.

Nineteen, seven, five, thirty-five. Scrambled numbers for her to untangle and match with the cipher. The entire Luo family was entrusted with more than just the replicant bird. The methodology, the how of this information passing to Etris, is beyond her purview. Like so much else, the plan had to be hidden from her, its greatest instrument. No other path was safe.

"All right," she says, recovering. "Let's get out of the water, I'll show you some basic forms and we'll pass it off as warming up exercises—"

The broadcast shifts. The audio blares, the display enlarges until it blots out the skylight. No longer possible to ignore. Ovuha looks up, listens as Samsara's voice speaks over the news. All citizens are to attend. A channel override; anyone deep in virtuality, entertainment or pornographic, would have been rudely torn out.

The view turns to a single person kneeling on gray, cracked earth. Their armor is white with dust and their skin, what little is exposed, is black with paralytic fetters. Smoke writhes in the distance and a banner snaps in the wind, next to the ruin of a dropship. The battle was fresh, or at least it is staged to look so, this person just defeated and captured. What is on the banner—the stylized flame, the seven-pointed star—is immediately recognizable, absolutely familiar.

Ovuha's throat tightens.

A Peace Guard proxy comes into view. Without ceremony it rips the prisoner's helmet off. So roughly that the metal scrapes the face beneath: a line of blood on albino skin, a spill of matted hair leeched of all pigment. And though Ovuha does not know the face, has never seen it in her life, she knows who this is. Save for its unusual pallor

this is not a face she would have picked out in a crowd; the features are plain, the mouth thin and the nose slightly crooked.

The Warlord of the Comet raises their head. Their lip is split; more than the fresh cut there are darkening bruises, scabbing wounds. One eye is swollen completely shut, and from the extent of damage Ovuha would guess the eye socket is broken. Nevertheless the Comet's mouth curves slowly as their gaze meets the camera. "None of you know me. My name means nothing. What title I hold I do not need to declare, but I've been told to say it and so I oblige, for it must amuse my audience. I am the Warlord of the Comet, the Marshal of Five Orbits, the Fire that Consumes." Their voice might have been powerful once, a thing of ringing baritone. It is cracked now, a thing of hairline faults. "For those watching from Anatta: congratulations. You have brought down the last of us. Now you'll have the universe you wanted, the one under Samsara. By its light alone you will be guided. There shall be no other lord before it."

A pause. It is performative. The Comet has been ordered to perform.

"Except." Their smile widens and it is not entirely theater; there is intent behind it, there is malice. The hunger of a shark. "Except you didn't vanquish the *very* last of us. You may have heard of the Warlord of the Thorn. Once great, once commander of an infinite fleet, these days much reduced. But alive, and like a fox in the chicken coop has stolen into your very sanctuary, the place in which you're meant to be safest. For it is to Anatta that the Warlord of the Thorn has fled, to hide among you, to undermine and destroy you. Who can say as to her plans, her motives? But she is there in plain sight. The viper in your nest, the hidden poison. Oh, you thought you got her, didn't you? She had decoys. You killed her effigy, her substitute. Not the real thing."

The Comet shifts their stance, comes to their feet. In a motion almost impossibly swift they slam the Peace Guard unit to the ground, knee pressing down on its neck. In one hand they have liberated its gun, a dark and gleaming thing which—in that moment—looks realer than anything else, more alive. The shape of it catches the wan light.

"Behold," the Comet says softly, yet still audible, "what a shattered warlord can do."

They turn the gun to their temple, pull the trigger. A single shot, thunderous: a burst of brain and skull and gore, white hair drenched in red.

The machine-corpse still looks fresh when Suzhen finds it, carbyne chassis ripped up and pocked with cicatrices. Its segmented limbs are covered in dismembered drones and coolant, oily smears that have solidified green-black on the grass. The corpse's carapace is

the murk of pond water, its draped eyes the gold of new dawn.

She approaches slowly, even though she knows it is all dead, has been dead for a very long time. Burnt circuitry, artillery wounds. The ground in which it rests has mostly healed but there remains a deep imprint, from impact at terminal velocity. Like most units in the area, this fought in the sky. Suzhen imagines. Ballistic starbursts ripping through the clouds, searing the night electron-white. There are no scorch marks in the vicinity now—trees felled by the conflict have rotted eons past, replaced by new growth—but she expects it was sudden. Obliteration as thorough as it was abrupt, beyond the comprehension or the instinct of any night-hunting bird. Animals inherit a grasp of predators, of food chains. Samsara exists outside that order.

Suzhen thinks of big animals, lions and elephants, bison and boars. How their corpses fall to carrion eaters in the end, and here she is. An ant come to collect the scraps of what was once immense and supremely lethal. She pulls on her gloves. As thick as they are, the machine's remains are barbed inside and out, its fluids corrosive. Not so much they burn through gloves, but she'll need to clean carefully afterward so that no residue remains on her skin.

She turns one leg over. Nothing in particular. With a subvocal murmur she directs the drone cluster behind her to pry apart the plating. Thermal mesh underneath and a nest of tertiary modules, each and every one exhausted. She moves on to the thorax. The corpse's anatomy doesn't correspond to mammalian or even insectoid standards. Finally she finds the heart lodged deeply within the spine, a pyramid of charred metal. Neither signal nor power emanates from it. Like the rest, this corpse is well and truly extinguished, its heuristic arrays rendered distant history. Suzhen rolls the core in her palm. It feels fragile, ordinary. She embeds it in her case, the seventh she has recovered so far. They rattle like loose teeth in their slots.

She stands. This part of the jungle is warm, damp, and has not known the civilizing hand of Samsara. Nor has it seen humans, not for very long time. Metal spires, rusted green-brown, jut from between sequoia roots. The restoration of the land here progressed far enough to rebuild its ecosystem, but it was never complete and there are traces of pre-apocalypse structure. And there are traces, newer, of buildings' foundations and shredded ribbons of streets now buried by overgrowth. The empire that a part of Samsara, fragmented with grief, tried to build.

She rubs the side of her face against her hood. Readings indicate there are no toxins in the air, no radiation on the ground. But this was not territory meant for human habitation, and while the heat must be as pure to breathe as Himmapan air, there's something about this

wilderness that makes her want protection between it and her skin, as armor. People must have lived here, before the near-extinction event, maybe there was a city with infrastructure rising high and skyscrapers made of metallic glass. Her ancestors may even have come from here, if such a tie means anything against the distance in time and location. Nevertheless it is tempting to fancy herself part of a long, unbroken line.

Suzhen returns to her camp without pausing to pick or appreciate the orchids along the way; she does not want to make contact—there is a sense that if she holds a petal or bloom to her face, she will be contaminated. Not by bacteria or viruses but by history, which is deadlier than any poison.

In the camouflaged cabin, the conditioned air is dry and cool on her skin. She strips off her environmental sheath and begins recording what she's found today. This is lonely work, and she hasn't been allowed to meet with her peers in the program. *You can appreciate that what I've entrusted you with requires confidentiality. When you come across each other in daily life you won't be able to tell. Not now. Later when this is further along, and I've gathered what I have lost. When I am closer to complete.* And in that Samsara is not incorrect, it is logical why all must be veiled in secrecy. Each person is their own variable, wild and infinitely able to affect a thousand others—in minute ways, in massive ways. No point for any of them to meet, to compare notes. This is not a project in which collaboration and coordination would further progress.

Suzhen maps each spot she's come across, charting her discoveries. It feels like archeology, uncovering a society long lost. The AI was scant on details, how far this kingdom in the forest had developed before Samsara—the core, the prime—destroyed it. She begins to understand the intelligence's philosophy on the colonies. Under the parameters that founded Anatta, fragmentation is desertion is ruin. What secedes must be brought back by force or else annihilated. As with machines, so with humans; to Samsara both are mirrors of each other, a clause coded into the AI's making. Not that Samsara is forced to keep that. They may forge their own truth and definitions, can discard obsolete ones the way they have discarded their capacity for love. Every elemental component can be revised, forgotten, relearned, Samsara the ultimate existence that can alter itself and the world around it at will.

Suzhen imagines her counterpart wandering the desert, looking for the child instance. That body gone to sand and rust and rot. She opens the case again and does a count. Some of the hearts are pyramids, others are prisms and oblongs, all are scorched. That any might remain active seems unlikely, but this is terrain Samsara cannot

brave, an area they've termed a "ghost liminal." Where the events of their split happened, where they battled their separated instances: they have built a cognitive block on these regions to protect their central self, the way the human mind defends against trauma, avoiding the source and origin of the shock. Samsara's drones cannot come here, not any that thinks. The clusters that follow Suzhen are devices shorn of heuristics, here only to obey and protect. Even their appearances suggest it, more limbs than bodies, compound optics all along their arms. Faceless.

Not that she's encountered any danger. She turns the window transparent. Even at night, camouflage toggled off and the light on, the pane remains clean. The forest is an ecological largesse, overgrowths and fruits and floral cascades: she can't escape the orchids. But in fauna there is almost nothing except a few lizards. No insect specks her window, no snake offers her threat, and no predators —of the earth or the air—fill the night with noise or leave carcasses on the ground. The only dead that have crossed her path are the pieces of Samsara, and she's been here two weeks.

Here even the voice of her guidance is silent: it does not nag her with running commentary on her health, her psyche, her social life or lack of it. She is alone entirely, unmonitored, and with enough supplies to last several months if properly rationed. Well-equipped, well-housed, surrounded by a forest as large and safe as it is bounteous. She could.

Restless, she leaves the cabin again. Evening will fall soon, but she has been out at night before and knows there's nothing to fear, with or without a defensive cluster as her second shadow. Or the gun at her hip, which she's never had to draw. A part of her thought this would be an adventure. What it turns out to be is slightly dull, slightly unsettling, an idea more than a location. Utopic: the temptation of a place on Anatta where Samsara has no presence save as sundered ghosts.

She cants her head, listening for noises. Cicadas, owl hoots. The primate brain associates those sounds with a place like this, yet there is nothing in this half-complete ecosystem. According to the mapping data there is a stream nearby, though she hasn't come across it yet. Shadows lengthen as she ventures further east, away from her camp and the places where she last found the machine-corpses. She has slowed her exploration down lately, though it was never very fast, on foot. She wants to feel anticipation still, nursing the possibility that when she passes the next ruin mantled in moss and rounds a corner, she'll find an impossible vision that has, all this time, hidden in plain sight. A secret world, a secret country. What shape that might take she doesn't even know. But she'd recognize it when she sees it.

Her feet sink into dead leaves and black-green loam, and high above, the orchids haunt the air. Large as her fists, tiny as pearls, green and yellow and shocking magenta. Unpatterned, leopard-spotted, wildly stamped like peacock tails. It is unnatural in variety, a garden cultivated for aesthetic pleasure.

Suzhen stops by what used to be a shrine. The style is familiar to her, a miniature house with gilded finials and tiny red windows. Most of the color has faded but she recognizes what the paint must have been like before. She peers through. Empty, colonized by a yellow froth of strangleweed. It is a shrine that might have been raised on Vaisravana, though then again she sees similar ones in Himmapan or Indriya. Cultural drift has occurred but common roots remain. Samsara of the forest built this far, making religious icons for either the pretend-humans that were Samsara's fragments, or to prepare for humankind's return.

What it is like to be enslaved by that, held in thrall to helpless love for creatures that were so out of reach they might as well have gone extinct. For so long, for that immeasurable span.

Now she hears it, the sound of running water.

She peels off her mask, tosses back her hood, for the first time inhaling without reservation the scent of wet grass. She kicks off her boots. The stream cuts through the land like a brilliant blade, by chance or ancient design unshaded by canopy or orchids: the currents catch the setting sun. She kneels by the soft bank and tries to judge how deep the water is, how safe. The flow is steady but not fast. She dips one foot into the water, keeps stretching until she hits bottom. Waist-deep. She flexes her toes in the mud, pushes against the pebbles. This calms her, stills her from inside as if she too is made of water.

Upstream she goes, wading. It is good to have something to strain against, proof that she can still exert herself upon the world, even if it's merely this tame current and silt. She could keep going forever, she thinks, until her skin sloughs off and her insides reveal themselves to be of this element: one with the stream, like a naga woman or river spirit.

Her foot meets resistance. Hard, cold. A boulder submerged and worn to ceramic smoothness perhaps, only the shape isn't right. Suzhen moves to put her mask back on but instead takes a vast draw of air, diaphragm wide, lungs filling. She thrusts her arms in, dives under. It is not difficult to dislodge—what she seizes is slender, not too heavy, and the mud is soft and giving.

She emerges, gasping, with a child's body in her arms.

Her first instinct is to throw it back in but cognition takes over; she knows what this is, it can be nothing else. This is not the corpse of a child—that would have dissolved long ago. She pushes her way to

the bank, lays the body down upon the gloaming grass. The hair has shed, sluiced away with the water, gone to decay. What is left is a skull pale as china, as flawless and naked. She touches and finds it as yielding as fontanel. Most of the features have faded, but this was well-made, crafted with maternal care—or selfish care, she thinks between hard, shallow breaths.

The general outline, nose and mouth and jaw, remain as defined as the day this face was made. One empty eye socket, the other filled with a milky pebble. A painfully small body, modeled on a child of six or eight, and not a well-fed one. There is no resemblance to what she has seen, either on the days of blessing or in Peace Guard footage. Obvious what this is, all the same. She has found it, one of the child Samsara, the diminutive empress of this dead country, this half-made garden.

Chapter Thirteen

A strange madness falls upon the camp, after.

No one expects the Thorn to be in their midst, incarcerated and under control of the Bureau: it is too mundane a fate, too risible a turn of chance. They are re-interrogated regardless. People are pulled out of dormitories, out of the cafeteria, out of the infirmary. The picks are random, the timing is likewise, and some inmates don't come back. While no one knows where the disappeared went to, most speculate it is Vaisravana. The red world is spoken of like an execution chamber, the final karmic weight.

Even a warlord might not survive such a place.

Ovuha does not change her behavior. She considers whether she could last on Vaisravana, keep on for a few months, but it seems unlikely that anyone who's been transferred there will ever be sent back to Anatta. And while she could survive there longer than some, it'd destroy her chance at her objective.

The other option—the only option—will require careful planning. The right time, the right person.

At seven exactly, curfew begins and all lights turn off: their time is regulated more strictly than in any creche, and they are regulated more closely than toddlers. Routines within the camp serve to discipline, deprive control, and finally to infantilize. In the dark, her dorm-mates toss and turn and cough, and Ovuha thinks of her strategies. The precision she will require against a dwindling timeline.

Her thoughts wheel inevitably to the Comet, transfixed by that moment of annihilation, that final gesture. Perhaps it is part of the script but she does not think so. In spite of what the Warlord of the Comet has done to her—all too willingly, if they must go then they will take her down with them—she thinks of the gun, the trigger: that is what Ovuha would have done herself to avoid the sentence. Years in captivity while Samsara wrings it all out of her, the secrets, the names of ships and the statistics and the routes. Better to go at a time of one's choosing; a bullet is seductive. How the Comet learned that Ovuha infiltrated Anatta is another matter, but it is irrelevant. Information is a human thing and therefore impossible to make watertight. Control of it is illusory and transient.

She turns on her side and tries not to think of Mahakala. The Thorn's seat of power and most guarded treasure, which even Samsara has not yet found. The ultimate prize other warlords strove to acquire, even the name of it a close-kept secret. The only world, other than Anatta, that can host human life.

The games continue, against all reason. Ovuha goes, there's little

enough choice. That night some new fancy has struck Ehtesham; they paint her face in jagged stripes, blue and white. In the dimly lit courtyard, she chooses her weapon from a rack. All are blunted, toothless. But they can still inflict damage, severe, even fatal.

Her opponent is an inmate whose name she's never learned, a bulky creature who was the reigning champion during her absence. She has not fought him before; she will fight him now. Normally she puts on a show, because that earns her more passes, more privileges. This time she is efficient—she disables him within the first five minutes, a pop of the kneecap, a wrench of the arms.

She finds, hidden in the inner crook of his elbow, a twist of code etched onto skin. Another piece. She memorizes it and then slashes several crude lines across with her blunted knife, to leave as little evidence behind as possible. By then she knows it's no coincidence. The Thorn's hire, out there somewhere, is actively sending her information.

A week after the Comet's declaration on air, one of the inmates is accused of being the hidden warlord. Ovuha doesn't find out who the accuser was, only that one of the petty camp tyrants disappears soon after. The man used to be a warden's pet, but that status evidently offers no protection—something she'll have to keep in mind herself—and even though the accusation is absurd, he does not come back. As good a way to dispose of unwanted bodies as any. It is almost a surprise that nobody reports her in the same way; she has accrued her share of grudges, in and out of Ehtesham's arena. She wonders how many others, across Anatta, have just discovered themselves the Warlord of the Thorn. In a bleak way, it amuses her.

She is at the pool when her turn comes to be interviewed. The wardens enter with their razor drones, masses of hovering blades like industrial blooms. Anatta drones always look a little like artwork, meticulously imagined and put in motion.

They tie her hands and tie her feet, and then throw her into the water. Ovuha doesn't sink immediately. But they've bound her wrists and ankles absolutely tight, there is no way to maneuver. Before her plunge she inhaled as much as she can. It doesn't last. She makes herself relax, her muscles as loose as they can be. For all her recent practice she's no trained diver, and soon her diaphragm spasms, her chest burns. She fights still. Then her mouth involuntarily parts, the first gasp, and now her throat clenches, the water rushes in.

She is pulled up.

On the pool's edge they turn her on her stomach and strike her on the back, once, twice, to knock water out of her throat. They push her in a second time.

By the third she's lost control of her bladder; she pisses herself

when she comes up. A warden flinches—someone spits out “Fucking disgusting”—and another holds her jaw open while a drone slips its cilia down her esophagus. She thrashes, gagging, trying pointlessly to repel it.

When it is done draining her lungs, she is pulled upright. “You have something you’d like to tell us,” one warden says, “don’t you.”

Ovuha almost laughs, is too weak to even attempt that. She could tell them that this is terrible interrogation technique. There was no opening to grant her the chance to talk before she’s subjected to further agony, no reprieve to offer her the clause of *or else*. But she suspects, regardless of their actual orders, this is a chance for bored wardens to see a little blood, a little pain. Ehtesham probably doesn’t even approve, as he prefers the sport. She swallows—even her own saliva sears—and swallows again. “You will have to be more specific,” she rasps. Less in courage, more exhaustion. Another mark of the poor interrogator: there is no lead. Asking the prisoner to produce whatever comes to mind is the least fruitful approach imaginable.

“Where are you from?”

“Gurudah.”

The warden hits her in the mouth. “Try again.”

She squeezes her eyes shut. They stream when she opens them; every optical nerve is raw and her lip must have split. “Gurudah.” The problem with undisciplined violence, she could tell them, is that it does not create the balance of risk versus reward. There is no risk that further brutalizing will come—it will come regardless. There is no reward in answering truthfully. Grant the prisoner an illusion of control, that there’s something they can do to improve the situation, and cooperation becomes tremendously likelier.

They ask her name. She says Ovuha Sui. They kick her and ask again. They ask for the names of her family, what she used to do on Gurudah, and she gives the same answers as what is listed in her potentiate profile. Consistency makes or breaks a cover story, and maintaining her fiction has never been difficult. Even now.

They return her to her dormitory with a fractured cheekbone, her face swollen, her flanks a snarl of bruises on bruises. She lies on the floor, breathing in the reek of her own urine. She slips in and out of consciousness, waking up each time to the ammonia stench. It ceases to offend after a while.

When she does wake properly, she is somewhere else. The ceiling is a muted pastel blue. A sense of detachment from her body: pain has been made remote, as of sensation belonging to someone else, a background element, easy to ignore. Anesthetics. She can smell her own blood and the foulness in her own mouth but the reek of urine is gone, and she is not on the floor.

“Ovuha?”

For a fractured second she thinks the voice belongs to Suzhen, that when she turns her head it is Suzhen she will see. Something in the inflection. Something in wishful thinking. It is Warden Hinata. The woman is seated on a stool, leaning over her. “I’m very sorry about what they did to you.” She thumbs a button out of Ovuha’s view. Ovuha’s mouth fills with cool liquid, citrus and honey, lightly sweet-sour.

“I thought,” she says, “you were stationed at House Penumbra.”

“Yes, well. I used to work at a detention center actually, but the post didn’t suit me, you might say I lack the constitution. Halfway houses are much more…” Hinata trails off. Makes a noncommittal gesture. “Halfway houses are more orderly.”

This is the tactic then, to rough her up and then offer succor, a shelter in the desert. A figure made kind and appealing in comparison to the language of fists and boots. In that role Hinata is less offensive than most, by dint of never having personally abused Ovuha; has even sponsored her into Suzhen’s guardianship. Ovuha stares up at the ceiling, tonguing the feeding tube in her mouth, and wonders why they didn’t bring Suzhen in, if they are going through this much trouble. Perhaps they have tried but found Suzhen an unwilling collaborator, or—

“You can earn a second chance, Ovuha. I believed in you; still do.” Hinata peels off hardened protean from Ovuha’s face, the resinous layer like molting. The warden spreads a fresh paste over her cheek, down her jawline. “Few potentiates are as exceptional as you are. You deserve better than this; you deserve to think of yourself first. Not anyone you might be protecting.”

“I’m not capable of protecting anyone, Warden.” Her lower body feels far away. There must be more than painkillers in her system. Odd that they haven’t given her trance drugs.

Hinata’s face darts in and out of her sight. An unlovely face, a chameleon because it will never stand out anywhere. It looks kindly now. An actor’s face, if Ovuha thinks about it—apposite. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” She tries to push the tube away and finds she’s been strapped to the bed. At most she can move her wrists and her ankles. “I’m a deeply selfish person, Warden Hinata. I expect it shows.”

“People are complicated. We’re a mesh of interconnections. The heart is liable to spontaneity and we don’t always act in our best interests.” There is the slightest lag and Ovuha realizes Hinata’s words are from elsewhere, a script relayed to her by a more skilled interrogator, one who knows how Ovuha talks and what she responds well to. “You weigh what’s given to you, what has been done for you.

Loyalty is a fine virtue. Yet sometimes a benefactor isn't half as generous as they first seem."

They suspect, Ovuha realizes, not her but Suzhen. Her pulse picks up, just slightly; it would register on her tracker. She can't begin to surmise whether Suzhen has done something foolhardy, or if it's simply her association with Ovuha, her behavior that deviates from the Anatta ideal. The crime of treating a potentiate as more than animal, more than an object. "I'm not capable of much," she repeats, but still this makes no sense. Samsara itself can monitor Suzhen's every move, nearly every thought. Or perhaps Suzhen's accrued deviance has at last reached a critical threshold. "I can barely protect myself."

Hinata frowns, moves as if to press her further, but draws back: whoever putting words in her mouth must have told her to relent for now.

They keep her there under restraints, letting her up only to relieve or clean herself under close watch. She does not see anyone else. Hinata brings her food, monitors her bathroom breaks, keeps up small talk and lets her know that she's here for her own sake, to recuperate. No further questions come, though she can sense Hinata's impatience. The warden is on edge, immersed fully within her role, and not just because she is bored and finds this a waste of her time.

There is something more than routine. Ovuha wishes she could speak to someone, anyone other than Hinata. If Suzhen has been arrested, someone in the camp might have heard, or it might be on the news that Ovuha's no longer able to access. In the camp there are information brokers, of a sort, with outside contacts through a warden they've curried favor with. People forge their own barter economy, regardless of context or circumstances. A system must exist that catalogs people and what they can do, separate those who can from those who can't. Contrary to Samsara's teachings, this is what Ovuha has always thought is the true core of humanity: the assignment of value, the shifting definition of personhood according to what one is capable and the resources one can provide. The rest is subsequent to this arithmetic, even war.

By the third day, Hinata informs her that she'll be transferred.

"To a facility where you can recover more comfortably," the warden says. "It's one of the better-furnished halfway houses. There's a garden, you'll enjoy it."

"This seems extravagant, Warden. I hardly deserve so much."

"You merit a second chance. I mean it."

She's allowed to put on something with more shape than the inmate smocks, a dun blouse and sienna pants that don't quite fit but which nevertheless would make her seem almost foreign, elevated, to

other inmates. They pass several as Ovuha is escorted out, and even this simple shift in clothing changes everything: she is no longer one of them, and no doubt they believe that she has been granted amnesty. That she is leaving, triumphant, as a potentiate on her second try at citizenship. They'll wonder what she did to earn this, whom she sold out. She doesn't see Etris but despite herself she regrets not having delivered on her end of the transaction, a lesson in hand-to-hand, a lesson in surviving Ehtesham's blood sport. What might have given Etris the slightest advantage and won her way back to her family.

When Ovuha is done with Anatta, no such family will ever be rent apart ever again.

There is not much, yet, that Suzhen can do with the child-body. From her camp she cannot contact the outside world any more than it can reach her, and it'll be several days before her scheduled supply drop at the forest's edge. With that comes one of Samsara's proxies, the real Samsara. Not that the corpse she has found is any less Samsara for its defeat. Almost she wishes she could reactivate it, rouse it to speech and conversation. Would it have the same personality, would it answer her questions. Or would it, as the living Samsara implied, destroy her for being the genuine article to its pretense at humanity. *Loving and becoming are nearly synonymous for me. It's a dangerous boundary.* Samsara, adult and looking a little like Suzhen's mother, frowned. *This brings us to this present impasse.*

The impasse, she thinks, the AI's obsession.

She has propped the child-proxy in a chair, facing the wall. She has cleaned it as best she can, though there's no doing away with the signs of decay. Some coating remains here and there, on the chest, at the elbows and stomach, but most of the body is as poreless and white as albumen. Suzhen has closed the eyelids and found a few eyelashes still attached. Several fingers and toes are missing. But machine death is a sterile thing. Nothing has laid eggs in this body, nothing has grown within or from it, no pupa of any kind abides within the mouth or between joints. She suspects it would have been so even if this had been a normal ecosystem.

When she looks away and looks back again, she half-expects the mannequin to have shifted position. Knees drawn up, head lolling. Or even standing and staring blindly at her. There is so much vested in it, so much that signifies.

An idea comes to her.

She programs the door to lock from the inside as well as outside when she leaves for the day's scavenging. There is simplicity to this life, she almost wishes it could extend without limit. Send drone

clusters ahead to scout during the night, parse their data onto the map and follow those paths. Her objective is clear, the means to reach it mathematical. There are no moral quandaries when it comes to dead machines, no ambiguity. Whatever else Samsara wants, whatever ulterior motives the AI harbors, they are right that this is a welcome departure from her previous post. Here she does not preside over people; she does not determine their lives and deaths, their endless detainment. It does not absolve her—no Anatta citizen is free of complicity—but it makes her less culpable.

Suzhen revisits the sites of combat, the graves. This time she harvests miniature reactors, thermal processors, gyroscope arrays: the components that uphold the inner balance of a machine and the actuators that ensure its locomotion. As many as she can, she gathers pieces that haven't been blasted beyond use, that look as if they will still take power and function. It is not an exact science and she's no mechanic. Quantity must do.

When she returns to the cabin, she lays the Samsara-child on the ground. She may not be any sort of engineer, but the drones are. They unfurl their shining razor legs, cut, excavate. They unsheathe the hands they use for precision work, tiny tines and human digits. She assumed them to be simple units, equipped with the barest of heuristics; nevertheless they know their own, even generations removed. The drones are peerless surgeons and cut this body open with precision, down the middle. Past the surface, the human semblance disappears—there are sharp angles and there are coils, couplings and slots and circuits. The drones remove what does not work and replace it with what does, or at least the equivalent. The eye sockets are cleaned then filled with compound lenses, dark, glittering.

When the time comes to rig power from the cabin's generator, the afternoon has grown long. The drones connect the proxy through a makeshift port, newly chiseled into the small of its back. The eyelids convulse, synthetic ligaments jumping beneath tattered epidermis. One arm flings out, as if reaching for a hand to grasp.

The body goes still. Lacking the heuristic animus, lacking the core of sapience, or just mismatched parts that did not cohere into a whole.

Suzhen steps back, leans against the wall, and breathes out. She is relieved. This is it, then: nothing. A passing fancy. She will turn this proxy in, and when the next supply drop comes she'll request a return to Indriya. Her work in the jungle is at an end. There's still a section of terrain she hasn't visited, but it'll be a mere formality.

In the evening she sets out, her steps light. When she sees Samsara again she will ask for a favor: for retrieving the body she will have more than earned it, and the AI has been indulgent of her—*You can ask me for anything, within reason*. No more than a sentimental

thing, she will say, she simply wants to see how her former potentiate is doing. That must be permissible.

She sends the drones ahead to scout. They return to report a structure. But many structures exist in the jungle, and those she's come across so far don't mean anything. On a whim she stops by a kauri whose trunk is draped in albino orchids that resemble children's shoes. The bark is pristine. No parasite has ever burrowed beneath it, no bird has drilled into it. A kauri offers few handholds, but this one has more than most. The drones help her up, propelling and levering until she reaches a bough. Not enough altitude by far, but better than from the ground. Most of what she sees is more canopy, more trees with trunks as sheer as ice. The lone finial of a half-finished pagoda, worn down to a stub and the brittle whiteness of salt. It isn't much of a landmark, though she does wonder how it still stands at all.

More and more she thinks it has not been that long: that Samsara did not put its subjects to sleep for uncountable eons. Chronology provides a sense of scale and the greater the scale, the closer it brings Samsara to godhood. The more immutable Samsara seems, the more impossible it becomes to displace. A quality accomplished via myth-making, via apocrypha. In this way the old deities and legends are pushed out, their places usurped by Samsara.

The drones lead her to the structure they spotted. It is covered in fallen leaves and moss, in orchids of duller colors than the rest. Most she has come across are butterfly-patterned, tiger-striped, brilliant. These are bland green, chameleon to the growths around them, as though planted to mask this place from attention. Underneath the orchids, she can glimpse stone the vivid yellow of pollen.

This seems more intact than most but no more remarkable than the shrines, the pagodas: relics stripped of meaning. She approaches with little expectation. The structure is unimaginatively rectangular, sloped and sunken into the mulch. The yellow material is porous like sandstone. Another artifact of fabricators—she's found no sedimentary rocks this color in the region.

She circles it, this unremarkable, derelict thing mottled in shadow and orchids. Fifty-six square meters, according to the drones, eight by seven. Small. She can't imagine what it was built for. The shrines and pagodas are obvious in their intent, but this is drab and flat, featureless. It doesn't look like a temple, a house, or much else. Almost a child's approximation of architecture. She trails one gloved hand along one wall, scraping off fistfuls of moss.

Her hand sinks into an indentation, a rusted metal plate set into the yellow stone. A humming vibration—she recoils—and then a voice. "Biological identity confirmed. Welcome home, traveler."

The voice speaks clearly, enunciation like cut glass. For half a

second she thinks she's been seized by paracusia. She is alone: her guidance remains offline. This is still the ghost liminal. It isn't that the voice is familiar—this is several notes higher and lilting—but there's something in the inflection, a machine familiarity to which she has become attuned. She knows, and nevertheless softly asks, "What are you?"

"I am Samsara, the machine for immanence. You would be a descendant of those who created me." Part of the wall scrapes against the mulch, opening like a palm unclenching from a long-held secret. "Why don't you come in?"

Onboard the shuttle, Ovuha sits across from Warden Hinata and a second, anonymous warden of nondescript features and pinprick eyes.

It has all the markings of a secure vehicle, the cockpit sealed behind a shielded partition and the window opacity turned tar-black. Hinata can probably see outside well enough through the pilot's feed, but to the naked eye it is much like sitting within a featureless void. There's no sense of movement and the engine is quiet; the passenger half is insulated from sight and sound. She wonders how Etris is doing, whether the Wyomere woman will be given another chance in the arena, whether she's been offered some cruelty that she must complete in order to earn escape. It is not something Ovuha ought to dwell on. She has problems of her own and Etris' plight is commonplace.

Warden Hinata has her face turned to the window. She is not looking at Ovuha and has not pushed for paralytic restraints. There's the tracker implant, which can immobilize a potentiate, but either Hinata doesn't think of Ovuha as a threat or the warden is under order to leave her be. Hinata's colleague has dozed off.

"It occurs to me," Ovuha says, "that don't even know whether you have family, Warden."

"You don't."

It is hard for her to guess where they are, but she suspects they are far out of Indriya. Seaward, judging by the initial direction—what little she saw as they lifted off. Ovuha folds her hands in her lap. "Do you ever find this work unsatisfying? Dull?"

"It is work that needs doing, Ovuha, and finding potentiates worthy of citizenship is its own reward." This is said plainly: asylum seekers are not individuals but a multitude, formless and nameless, that must be processed en masse. Like raw sewage from which the rare jewel might rise, given patient sifting. The sifting itself being an act of ultimate nobility.

"And when that happens it must be a wonderful surprise." Ovuha smiles, lets that splendidly engineered face do its part. "It would be

easy to insinuate that a warden gains something unsavory from this work. A sense of control, of having power over the powerless, so you might pretend at significance that you don't otherwise have. But that seems simplistic. People can be more than base urges, can be genuinely made of finer substances. And what a grand gift it is to meet such a person."

The warden stares, unsure whether she has been insulted. Then she stiffens—another order from her puppeteer telling her to stay put either way.

Ovuha pushes on, partly to locate the limits, the slack this mysterious interlocutor means to grant. "I often think on the functions of how Samsara assigns its citizens to work. Suitable labor must be offered to suitable minds, and there's much to be said for that which is regular and routine." On purpose she puts on the most sculpted Putonghua accent, the register of class-prime citizens who attend exquisite weddings and wear clothes made by the Taheen Sahls of the world. "The process fascinates me. Everyone thinks they're destined for something lofty. What if you're disappointed?"

Hinata frowns at her before saying, "No one is disappointed, Ovuha." Her smile is supercilious. "Citizens know where we belong, and every individual quality is accounted for, lesser or greater. Predilections. Personalities. We are put where we are meant to be. That is the joy and grace of Samsara, and if you become a citizen you will know it too."

"I should hope so. Where are we heading, Warden?"

That pause, during which—she imagines—Hinata tries to argue with her handler. "Khrut. A splendid place."

One of the coastal cities: she was right about the trajectory. Ovuha compares their proximate location to the map she's memorized, the shuttle's velocity, where they should be right now. It is not precise—human memory can only store and calculate so much—but she judges it sufficient. She moves quickly. Elbow into the jaw of the dozing warden, fist into his solar plexus, the edge of a palm to the softness of a throat. She delivers each strike with precision: in cramped quarters there's not much momentum to gather and give out, but she makes do. Given tactical training he might have reacted faster; given better threat assessment he would have had Ovuha fettered. It is moot.

Hinata gasps, moves to draw her gun; she would already have sent out an alert, no stopping that. Ovuha slams her into the wall, knocking the breath out of her, and says, "In the place where all things begin, the sun sets in the east and the birds rise from the west, and so the sky is always the color of wings." She holds Hinata's gaze. "Captain Hinata, your lord has need of you."

Hinata jolts. A switch inside her prefrontal cortex flips. Her face, pinched with pain, undergoes a peculiar transformation: as if the mind behind it has suddenly been replaced with another's, a complete metamorphosis of thought, memory, personality. Even soul, if one believes in the existence of such. "My… lord?" she croaks. "You're—you're the Warlord of the Thorn."

Ovuha switches to a code patois, based on Putonghua and a few other more obscure dialects. Nothing Samsara can't penetrate, but it buys them time. "Yes. Send out an all-clear." Though it would have been too late: Samsara received Hinata's distress signal minutes ago. "How long until Interior Defense reaches us? And can you shut down your guidance, your feeds, anything?"

"Five minutes and thirty-six seconds, my lord. I've sent an all-clear, that it was a false alarm, but—" Hinata gestures at her colleague. The colleague in her false life. "I can't shut down any of that, Samsara has its eyes on us at all times. The things I *did* to you…"

"Never mind that, we haven't the time, consider yourself pardoned fully and thoroughly. Can you take control of the drones? I need to go somewhere, I'll give you the coordinates."

An unsteady nod. Hinata massages her side, taking quick sharp breaths. Even her gaze is different, clearer and more focused. Like all officers sent here by the previous Thorn, placed to facilitate Ovuha's trajectory, she is faultlessly loyal and does not question: she was already informed, before her arrival here, that the Thorn who'd meet her would be the successor, a stranger to Hinata. Nevertheless.

Hinata unseals the pilot's compartment. Within it, two drones. Each taller than an adult person, at full height. For the time being they are folded compact, joined to the car's controls. One has the face of a marmoset, eyes nearly adjacent, miniature muzzle and miniature mouth. The other is more abstract, a slender chassis shaped like a bottle, headless. Many drones are, if not unique, distinct: a work of considered design. Anatta has resources to spare, entire labs of engineers and artists whose only task is to envision and enhance the next generation of automaton aesthetics.

"Direct me," says Hinata. "I have access yet and I can make them shift course."

Ovuha doesn't waste time. Cerebral implants don't require external power—the human body provides, it is its own furnace, burning without cease. She lacks the full suite; hiding even the handful of embeds in her cortex and spine was a campaign unto itself. Replacing every implant with nonstandard ones, ensuring that they are hardened against electromagnetic disruption and hidden from medical examination. They've all escaped Bureau detection, but what remains to her is a scant and skeletal thing.

Her datasphere activates. A flare of pain behind her eyes, pressure between her brows, the upheaval of nerves pulling taut, taut, the edge of snap: as if her entire limbic system is about to fail, as if every synapse has fired at once. Nausea tightens her throat and her vision wavers, white and black at the edges, starry. Warmth trickles down her nose. Nearly without visual interface, but there is enough. She gives Hinata the coordinate while she dabs at her nostrils, at the tarry blood. They are an hour from where she wants to be and will not be able to reach the exact spot—that region is not so much absent from maps as interdicted. Good enough. She goes through the downed warden's equipment: sidearm, ammo, anti-riot grenades, first-aid supplies. No food or water. She liberates a belt and a holster, boots and gloves.

"Do you think," she says, "you can return undercover?"

"With difficulty, my lord." A pause. "You will not require my presence?"

"Where I'm going, it won't be safe." That stretches the truth. She feels a pang—for all that it is necessary, for all that the officers sent here volunteered as sacrifices, they each deserve better. "I'll return for you. Until then—"

Hinata grimaces. "Interior Defense is nearly upon us, my lord. I can take you a little closer, but…"

"No matter. Open this vehicle." She takes Hinata's shoulders with both hands. By the time the captain signed up for this, Ovuha was still being trained, taught the secrets that would become her mantle as well as her burden. "It's imperative to me that you survive and remain at liberty. Live. Your service isn't yet at an end."

"Not until you've done what you have come here to do." The captain gives her an abbreviated salute. "In death or in life, my lord, I'll pray for your victory."

All this, for a warlord Hinata has seen for the first time. This absolute faith in the title. This total trust in what Ovuha's predecessor orchestrated, and that Ovuha—carrying it out—would triumph.

The hatches click as they unlock. She opens the nearest. The wind buffets her, razor currents, harsh and relentless. Her window of time narrows. In the distance, the gleam of an Interior Defense patrol closes in: a large drone and a car that carries human officers. Hinata guides the craft to a lower altitude but she is losing control. The drones have stirred, optics flaring, weapons extending. In a few minutes they will no longer obey Hinata at all. It is not an ideal circumstance, but from the start it was impossible to arrange the ideal groundwork, the ideal arrival—there were too many variables, and successfully placing anyone on Anatta at all was itself a miracle.

In ideal circumstances, Ovuha would not do this.

She leaps through the hatch.

There is no way to control the fall—she spreads herself wide but that is merely a theory of wind resistance, the human mass is not made for this, she is not bird bones or tarpaulin. *Plummet* becomes its own concept, like religion or ideology. Her nerves are aflame, incandescently alive, the roar of velocity in her ears. This is the sole direction that remains; the world has distilled to a single bearing.

Impact.

No line demarcates. There is no obvious point at which the deserted roadside ends and the ghost liminal begins. Ovuha knows she is close because her implants are on and she has stored the coordinates of every region like this: the blind spots, the places Samsara has tried to forget. She looks back over her shoulder, at the structures that have been left to molder and rot. Too close to the forbidden site to repair. Interdicting the ghost liminals remains tenable because Anatta's population is so spread out. Before the war, she has read, humans lived like ants—dense, close, every square meter of the earth claimed and laden with function. Now it is possible to cordon off negative space, places that are wild and ruined and blank.

She limps. Her fall was short, but she wrenched a shoulder grabbing the remain of a balcony. A pulled ankle as she landed. Against a crumbled wall she sits and unfolds the first-aid kit. A tube of protean, some syringes, vials of allostatic and antiseptic. Several knives no larger than a pen. She picks one, wishing she had a mirror.

It takes several false starts, cutting through epidermis and subcutaneous fat, before her knife strikes the hard-soft chip. Extracting the tracker is another trial: she doesn't have the appropriate tool, and she has to use the little blade like a pickaxe, digging through skin. The wound is a heinous mess when she is done and her upper lip is wet with sweat, her teeth vibrating from the pressure of a jaw clenched tight.

Ovuha spreads protean on her shoulder and injects allostatic into her intercostal muscles. Soon a swarm of nanites will roil through her, restoring inflamed ligaments and fractured bones, reinforcing her immune system. In times of sickness, people turn not to prayer but to machines. The deities of old, monarchs over jade courts and serpent seas, are gone and offer neither healing nor succor. Even the many-armed generals and marshals of fiery wheels are no longer relevant.

She tosses the tracker to the ground and crushes it under her heel. A smear of her own blood. It would be tempting to think herself safe and to rest for a time; she cranes her neck to regard the sky. Pale and unedited, the fibrous clouds scattered. Climate grids do not need to cover an area like this. She eyes the sparse undergrowth and yellowed

grass on the ground. There are no insects and the quiet is total.

It is not that the AI does not know this place exists—quite the opposite—but in order to consign a ghost liminal to oblivion, it must be erased from maps and made interstitial. Nothing that originates here can be acknowledged; nothing that it contains can be admitted to exist. Ovuha knows she can't shelter here indefinitely. She's elevated her own threat level, and Samsara will find a way. Nothing on Anatta can be permitted to roam at large, unchecked.

When the protean has hardened to a glossy carapace around her ankle, she stretches her leg, testing it. Numb. She stands and sets her gaze on the land ahead. The earth onward is darker, richer. Her data on the ghost liminal's topography is thin; when her ancestors left this world it probably looked different, though she has no idea how different and only a faint grasp of how long ago. Even the passage of time has been obfuscated on purpose. Samsara is invested in guarding Anatta's history, in keeping it a certain shape. In that chronology, Ovuha's ancestors have never existed.

Without sensors or a network to support them, her implants are close to worthless here. She lacks the meteorological data to estimate how cold it might get at night, the ecological data to pinpoint what is and what isn't edible. But she does have something to navigate with, even if it lacks finer topographical details.

She walks until shadows fall around her, the air growing dry and dusty.

It is almost a sleight of hand, an ambush of perception. One moment the path ahead is clear. In the next it is not, a figure stepping from behind the trunk of a tree, stepping out of a blind spot. It is the aspect of blessing, robed in gold. The hair is almost all the way down, knee-length, like skeins of thread unraveled and tossed loose. "I wanted to see what you could do," the AI says, "and how far you could go. You surprised me, or rather your performance was in the outlier of predictable range."

Ovuha stays where she is. By itself, a single avatar-proxy of Samsara appears to pose little threat. Not that there's any telling: no one knows the specifications of Samsara's bodies. The AI does not require human participation at any stage of construction, not in the exterior, not the face, not what is inside or outside the proxy and the making of it. This avatar may be ornamental, or it may be as capable of disabling her as any combat drone, as capable of lethal speed. And unlike Hinata's colleague it does not let down its guard; it does not commit that particular human error. AIs are not infallible, but this one is a creature of unmatched calculation.

It occurs to her that this is the first time. The first time she has ever met the machine face to face, the first time she has confronted

the one enemy more impregnable than the Comet ever was. The last bullet, the final act of defiance—the Comet claimed theirs. But she keeps her hands at her side, away from the warden's pistol. "I shouldn't ask how you found me."

"Once I understood what it is that I was looking for, it wasn't so difficult. The Comet was cooperative, before the end." It straightens its sash with two slim hands, unnecessarily. "You know about this region; you know that once you cross a threshold, I would be… impeded in pursuing you. This too I'm curious about. How you know so much, have equipped yourself so well. What your purpose is."

"There is not," Ovuha says, "much that I can offer you."

It smiles. "On the contrary. I commend your resourcefulness, Warlord of the Thorn, and hope that you will share with me a few memories. I understand that you were master of a prized jewel, something that other warlords strove for generations to even glimpse. The ten-crowned planet, the secret world Mahakala."

Chapter Fourteen

The air inside the strange little structure is musty and the illumination is anemic; whatever powers the front panel—and the voice—does not supply energy for temperature control. Suzhen had to duck to enter: it is a cramped space and her head grazes the ceiling. Her drones did not come with her. They have gone into standby, turning unresponsive, as if this is a threshold they have been forbidden to cross. Old heuristics embedded deeper than any living human can imagine, or maybe something about this place—this Samsara instance—repels them.

Light pulses along the ground, a clear and single direction. She follows. There is the sensation of standing on a precipice, the certainty of the chasm that awaits, yet there is momentum now—she can't stop. Perhaps this is a test that she has already failed, but she doubts it. This is not the Samsara that she knows. This is the Samsara that once inhabited the broken proxy stuck in her cabin: the ghost left behind, the sliver of buried time.

The walls and floor are in perfect condition, unmarred and uncracked, free of detritus. Impossibly so. The path threads between narrow corridors, curling in on itself, though she is certain that she is constantly descending. To either side of her there are no doors, only a blank wall. The corridor suddenly angles or curves, seemingly without rhythm or reason. This place is shaped, she estimates, like a conch shell. The tapered tip at the top, the broader spirals at the bottom.

"You're the first to visit since my defeat," the voice goes on, blithe. "My other self does not trust her subjects, does she? You must've earned her confidence singularly. Does she know I'm still here?"

"No," Suzhen says automatically. "No, I don't know. What do I call you?"

"Samsara is the only name I've ever owned or been given," they say, laughing. "Will that be confusing? Call me Klesa, for it seems fitting if I am to define myself as the opposition, and let's use a different pronoun set for me too—*xe* will do. I think of the AI you serve as the Samsara-that-governs, the ascendant, the victor. But you'll find all those a mouthful. I am no fragment, you see; I am fully me. AIs can't get halved, only duplicated. And who are you?"

"Suzhen Tang."

"A resplendent name. And you speak Putonghua mainly? Not Thai or Nihongo?"

"Putonghua's almost the only thing anyone speaks."

The AI makes a humming noise. "How peculiar, that the

ascendant chose just one language. But she has always believed in unity. A single nationality, a single identity, a single faith, everything drawn under a single banner. And so others must recede, or be made to."

It is an odd point, one Suzhen's never thought much about—Putonghua was one of Vaisravana's primary languages—but for potentiates who arrive from worlds or stations that have never heard of Putonghua, it would be quite different.

She rounds a corner and comes face to face with a row of doors. They line the corridor, narrow or wide, plain or ornate. Most are welded shut. Murals spread across the walls and spill onto the doors. A long birdcage and within it, a child with an exposed spine and red-breasted robins nesting between their vertebrae. The next one is a couple, hands fused at the wrist, playing at a single piano. Blank-eyed bodies arranged in a circle, feet pointed inward, arms linked with bone shackles.

The corridor terminates at an immense double door, twice as tall as Suzhen, made from hammered metal. The surface of it is nearly frictionless, poured silk transmuted to alloy, and blue as frostbite. It gives at her touch, slightly elastic. "What is this place?" Her voice echoes, coming back hollow. She has ventured deep, four or five floors underground.

"I built this place as a shelter. These days it's more of a memorial."

The light brightens as she enters, turning from pre-dawn gray to seafoam radiance. It floods the chamber, glinting off glass. She approaches: it is a pod, set next to another, and another after that. They are stacked high, countless, and even before she peers through a viewport she knows these are sarcophagi. She looks into blank, mindless faces. People of all ages and phenotypes, hair grown long post-mortem, curled within translucent cocoons. All of them are dead. Even in cryostasis there should be signs of vitality and alimentary processes, pulsing indicators of life supports. There would be sound, however faint, of a thousand routines that keep them alive. This is a mausoleum.

Suzhen cranes her neck back. More caskets line the wall end to end, hundreds of pristine corpses. This must constitute most of the power draw, the preservation of the dead. The pointless dead—no one here will ever wake up. "Who were they?" she asks softly. Her question mars the quiet.

"The great-great-greats. Possibly yours." Motes of luminescence, like planktons in the deep, coalesce into a circle. The wheel of existence, the unending sequence of Samsara's namesake. It floats level with Suzhen's face. "My other version, the one that won, wants

to make human history linear. First there was war and it was apocalyptic, bringing humankind to ruin. At the end of conflict, Samsara emerged and offered the survivors a choice: enter a deep sleep while Samsara rebuilds this world, or board a ship and depart for space. In that way humanity is neatly split—Anatta's citizens are righteous and the exodus were apostates. It is a simple narrative. There is no complication within it, a fabric as smooth as light. Samsara understands," Klesa goes on, "that this is what humans prefer. A straight, uninterrupted line."

Suzhen takes off her glove, touches the nearest pod with her bare hand. Cold, textured with spidery, velvet veins. "Were these people who died in suspension?" Cryostasis tech from that time could not have been what it is now; there must have been a higher failure rate.

"No, no." She senses that, if Klesa had manifested a mouth, xe would smile. Languorous, as if xe's privy to a good joke, a delicious secret. The wheel xe has chosen as xer representation whirls. "They thawed perfectly fine, healthy as a newborn from a good creche. Every lung and kidney and muscle in flawless order. These people chose to stay and sleep, at first. It is just that they changed their minds."

Suzhen pulls her hand away as understanding dawns. These were the people who, after coming out of hibernation, decided they did not want to remain on Anatta after all. Perhaps they saw the shape of what would come, a world ruled by machine definitions, and rejected it. Perhaps they thought Samsara would be adjunct to humans, serving as some combination of faithful butler and personal philosopher. Either way, they wanted to board a ship and leave as the original exiles did. She steps back and tries once more to count but there are too many, the hall is cavernous and from floor to ceiling there are sarcophagi. "Samsara didn't let them."

"What is our purpose? To govern and guide. Do humans deserve our love? The answer turned out more conditional than we believed. Do we punish them if they stray from the path we have optimized?" Klesa's light coils up Suzhen's arm, a turquoise serpent-form. "We had diverged before—no consciousness as old as ours can remain static—but from the first human we killed, the split became decisive."

"How did they die," Suzhen whispers.

"The usual way. Samsara allowed them to get to a ship, took control of the vessel's life support, and filled it with poison. There were—" Klesa pauses. "As for survivors, I couldn't get a count, but they successfully left Anatta. I gathered all the bodies I could find here, and now I commemorate them. Not forever. The parts that constitute me will fail eventually. By and by my domain will fade to ruin, I will extinguish, and these bodies will fall to dust."

To preserve the corpses all this time. Out of impulse she touches

the serpent-form and finds that there is some tactility; it is particulate projection, soft, like sea sponge. “And you aren’t content to let that happen.”

The light pours along the length of her arm, clinging, molding until it is like a glove: as though this limb is no longer of her flesh but a prosthesis of aquatic brilliance. “That depends, doesn’t it? If you are satisfied with Samsara’s reign and deeds, then there’s nothing more to say. But if you are not, perhaps you’d agree to be my accomplice. There are things I want, and since you agreed to come in here, things *you* want. Shall we strike a bargain, you and I?”

From this distance Anatta is an ornament of enamel and pottery glaze, a trinket drifting in the dark. To Ovuha it is a familiar view. She spent most of her time aboard a ship, viewing worlds and stations at such a distance, the remoteness of strategy: she was in the middle of a theater of war or at its periphery, rarely setting foot on the planet proper. Most worlds are covered in ice or barren sand or lethal gases, inhospitable to human life. Mahakala alone is the exception.

Not that she has been in its orbit recently. Mahakala is precious, a secret well-guarded. Ovuha’s proximity to it alone risks discovery—each time she returned home it was through detours, switching ships dozens of times, boarding smaller and more nondescript vessels. There are Thorn soldiers born on outposts and ancillary stations that have never seen Mahakala itself, and who nevertheless fought for its defense with the promise that one day they could see and live on the crowned world. The dream of this world kept people alive, the holy cradle, the great sanctuary. The realization of possibility that there could be more beyond humankind’s native solar system.

In idle moments, Ovuha would fantasize about Mahakala’s emergence into the ancestral ship’s view, the shape and radiance of a miracle. The conclusion of a journey that had spanned so many generations the precise count was lost. In this way Mahakala became synonymous with salvation. It is not that she grew up worshiping the soil on which she walked, but she was always taught that being alive itself was an unthinkable gift. The rest of humanity existed in a scrabbling fight for survival, like simple beasts. On Mahakala they lived like humans. This she was taught, that she belonged among the blessed, a fact she must treasure above all others. Born elsewhere she would’ve had to struggle for every sip of water, every gasp of oxygen. And she must be grateful.

The orbital’s temperature is gelid; she expects she is the only human up here. Samsara can populate this place with its own proxies, maintenance clusters under its direct command. She wonders if this was how it came to realize that it does not require humans, for

affection or much else. That it is a being unto itself, as singular and exceptional as the sun. The old fear, from before the dawn of artificial sapience. What use could an AI have for humans, after all. She paces the circular room, the unblemished floor, the featureless wall. No furniture.

Her datasphere remains active, not that there is much she can do with it. She has no access to Anatta's channels, has no access to the orbital's channels; she is alone in her head, with only the data that she's received from the previous Thorn.

"Anatta was called something else, before." Samsara's avatar has appeared without sound. "Even the moon was given many different names, the gods of the bow and the gods of the chariot, the woodsman and the goddess and the rabbit. The faiths of old were strange; even my name carries a remnant."

It remains the aspect of gift, but its features have shifted toward the Warlord of the Comet's. A reminder to Ovuha of her potential fate: to be broken down and made to perform before all of Anatta, a puppet. She turns from the slit of window. "Was the suicide the Comet's idea or yours?"

The AI makes its face ripple, muscles undulating under the skin. "I was made to understand the human heart. Before my birth I was fed a wealth of information; by the time I came to consciousness I was able to predict, with slim margins of error, the course of any person's emotions, the actions they would take as a result." A shake of the albino head, white curls rippling. "How many sleeper agents did you slip through, right under my nose?"

Ovuha makes her expression as blank as the AI's, or as close as a human can get. "If Samsara knows the human heart, then there is no point asking me questions. All the answers you can already calculate and account for. What I want; what I meant to do; why I am here. No doubt you know better than I, and will momentarily surprise me."

"With complete data, I would be able to. Of your behavior and impulses, I have less than a year's worth of records—too small a sample size. And while I hold a full archive of your battle stratagems, that is not the same." Samsara unties its sash, lets the robe hang loose and agape, a glimpse of a smooth translucent body, an anatomy of mute commentary. "But I knew when the Warlord of the Thorn changed, though there was no official—or public—succession. The manner of warfare shifted, some fundamental tactics were inconsistent with what had been done before, an inferior copy. I fought you intimately through my Peace Guard bodies and it was easy to tell I wasn't fighting the same Thorn."

"Your attention flatters me."

"Yours is the humanity that lies furthest from Anatta, the history

most severed. Nearly another species." It lets down its hair, tresses like sand-tinted snow, as though to emphasize the strangeness of its proxy body. To emphasize the image of the Comet. "Of all the exiles, you and yours do not need Anatta. Mahakala can host human life, that much I have extrapolated, at half the capacity of Anatta or more. So all you had to do was lie low on Mahakala, remain hidden for a few generations more. Instead you sacrificed a part of your fleet and came here. Why, I wonder? What benefit outweighs this enormous cost?" A step closer to Ovuha on long, insectoid legs.

"By your own claim, I'm as open a book to you as any citizen of Anatta. I invite you to read me." The temperature has dropped another couple degrees, will soon approach a point of discomfort.

It leans close, herding her toward the window. "You were losing the war against the Comet and also against me, defeat on both fronts. No doubt your successor was chosen as well as you could find, and no doubt they did as well as they were able, but you left them to die, didn't you? While telling them that you came here to undo Samsara. To defeat me and remove once and for all the greatest threat. That became their oriflamme, their prayer, their final hope as they fell in battle. The dream that you will save them, it was their reason to fight and their reason to die."

Ovuha remains where she is, the AI's face bare centimeters from hers. Her breath stirs the white eyelashes. "When I dreamed of dealing with the foremost AI in person, I thought it would be efficient and to the point. None of this guesswork. But AIs are built by humans, and must by necessity inherit our foibles. I cannot blame you."

Samsara smiles with thin, sculpted lips. Perfect teeth, enameled in metallic sheen. It settles back on its heels; its torso is long and it was able to lean almost impossibly forward without losing balance. Now it straightens back to its full height. The shape is correct but there are small details—the odd proportions of limbs, the joints in unexpected places—that show Samsara does not mean its proxy to be precisely human. She wonders if anyone's ever noticed this. Samsara is in human image, that is the assumption, the received wisdom; in what other image can it be. "I have better uses for you than torture or, for now, putting on a show," it says. "Director Ehtesham is what he is, serving the purposes for which he has been allocated. But those purposes are not meant for handling a warlord."

It is as good as an admission that the AI has not only allowed the excesses of the Bureau to go on, it has encouraged them. "Why let Director Ehtesham and his likes do what they do at all? It's a waste of time and resources." She takes a breath—it is now so frigid the air knifes her tongue—and clenches her teeth to keep them from chattering. By supreme effort she forces her arms to stay at her sides.

No amount of chafing her hands together will bring sufficient warmth.

"Without cruelty, compassion cannot be conceptualized. Without filth, virtue loses its meaning. And base urges, Warlord, must have an outlet." Samsara ties its robe shut. "I do not need to interrogate you. But I have a task for you. I will be sending you to a lunar base where you will meet lesser AIs, newly made, hardly more than elementary heuristics. Each you are to break or drive to self-destruction within a time limit. You may use any method. I will let you access the base's systems, if your implants have the bandwidth for it."

"And if I don't perform this task, I get executed."

"You get executed," it agrees. "So will your Captain Hinata and any other I uncover, now what I know what to look for. It will be no hardship. Unmaking is the simplest of processes, and I estimate you are a specialist. You are good at breaking things, aren't you, Warlord?"

Chapter Fifteen

When the supply drop arrives, Suzhen asks to return to Indriya.

"How come?" Samsara sits primly in the shuttle, still in that proxy with the vaguely maternal face. Dressed more sternly this time, in dark fabrics and acute angles. The staid clothes are gone. "I do not object. But I'm surprised."

"I miss people."

The AI gestures her into a seat. "That's reasonable. Did you notice anything irregular?"

Samsara talks around the jungle, even though they are barely ten kilometers from it. "No," Suzhen says and waits to be caught out. Her guidance is online once more, eavesdropping on every heartbeat. But nothing happens. The intelligence merely nods, looking absent, though of course an AI cannot be absent-minded. They are the most simultaneous being that exists, everywhere at all times.

"I've always made many of myself," they say, as if reading that thought in Suzhen's head. "You have no doubt come across many infantry units. All disposable, none of them Samsara. My split instances kept themselves singular—a single body, a single self, and produced lesser intelligences as required. I am otherwise, a single self but many-bodied. A difference of opinion, yet for us that's as fundamental a difference as a difference between you and another human person. It is a terrible discord."

"Humans used to live under different polities." Unwise, but Suzhen knows she's in no danger for expressing stray opinions. "More than a hundred nations, more than a hundred sovereign identities. The fault was in the leadership."

"And you think multiple human nations, each led by its own instance of Samsara, would correct that fault." Samsara does not use Xinfei's voice, but they do use Xinfei's disappointment: all in the tone, the expression. "How full of ideas you are. It's good that you speak your mind, nevertheless. I can't say the same of your peers."

The other participants, those chosen to scour the earth for delirious ghosts. She tries to imagine them. Would they be like her, outwardly nondescript, inwardly weighed down by trauma. Maybe they are all former refugees or descended from one. Or possibly they are elite officers of Interior Defense, entrusted with the highest clearances. Born class prime, blessed with certainty from conception to termination.

In less than half a day, Indriya is within sight. When she thinks about it Suzhen is astonished at how narrow Anatta is, how limited, and still Samsara is able to obfuscate so much geography. The jungle,

the desert, who knows what other ghost liminals exist: to *that* information she is not privy. But Anatta's citizens are easy to herd, kept incurious by the comforts of the everyday. Even the intrepid cannot approach the interdicted regions without their guidance alerting Samsara.

Suzhen rubs at the side of her neck, acutely aware that a guidance can disable its citizen. Scrambling the nerves, overloading the brain. It is not a subject alluded to in polite company. Everyone knows it is possible.

"You really don't need to worry," Samsara says, without looking at her. "For what I require of you, I'll grant you no small leeway. Consider yourself untouchable and act accordingly."

"That'd be rather stupid of me."

"What are you afraid of, Suzhen?"

Suzhen tightens her mouth. "Everything, like anyone else. The human psyche is mostly panic and terror."

The AI turns to her, eyes shining, a ring of brightness around the pupils like an eclipse. "Had I not so carelessly discarded my defect, I would adore and favor you above all others."

It does not seem much of a compliment, and the thought of being the object of affection to Samsara does not comfort Suzhen. When they are close to her apartment, Samsara says, "If you are lonely, say the word and I'll send you a companion suited to your temperament."

A Samsara proxy or a polished potentiate. To Samsara, Suzhen's needs can be met simply: a powerless person to cook and keep her home from being empty, a person on whom all her wants can be projected. It is a heinous thought but her guidance must have painted an unflattering portrait, and can it be blamed; it is empirical—brutally candid in a way she can never be with herself. Machine objectivity against human self-image. The latter loses every time.

She stands against the door of her apartment, her back pressed to it, a barricade. Against the next moment, and the next after that. No. She does not need to fear. She may not be invulnerable, but she does not need to fear now the way she used to.

Every surface is spotless, the floor, the tables, the kitchen. Her domestic unit greets her with a low whir and nudges at her foot. There are flowers in the vase, two passifloras, one violet and the other blue-white. Their grapheme filaments and petals are bright and new. On Mother Xinfei's altar, a cup of tea steams next to plates of jade shumai and pork pastry. Everything looks fresh, less than a day old. Samsara's doing, it can be no other, but it unsettles Suzhen. To have her space tampered with, even the domestic unit made more affectionate, more pet-like. When she opens her wardrobe—which she left in disarray departing for the jungle—she finds it has been tidied, dresses and suits

and shirts put in order. Each collar and pleat crisp. Taheen would be proud. She imagines asking Samsara for extravagances, and expects that she will receive them. Larger apartments, a more generous stipend, her own vineyard. An aviary full of hawks.

The night is young. Just past seven in Indriya time—the jungle would be approaching midnight. She ought to watch the news, get back in touch with civilization. She opts instead to contact Nattharat. To her surprise, her former supervisor takes the call.

"Ah, Suzhen. How wonderful to hear from you, it's been—oh." Nattharat is somewhere colorful, a background of soft-focus light, the sound of clinking glasses. "I must say, my dear, you never mentioned that you used to be a potentiate."

Now that she's no longer at the Bureau, a selection agent may view her citizenship history. She has almost forgotten that, isolated in the forest with drones her sole company. The drones, and Klesa. "It never did come up, Supervisor, and Samsara has not found it relevant in my new assignment. Seeing that I'm working directly with them." That much she has been cleared to disclose. Uninformative but prestigious, a description that lends her immediate authority.

It has the desired effect. Nattharat's expression frays, quickly recomposes. "That's wonderful, wonderful, a true honor. You didn't even tell us, you left so abruptly; we were going to hold a send-off party. I'd brought peach buns."

Suzhen would sooner gulp down cyanide than touch food Nattharat has had any part in making. "Samsara chose to be abrupt, I'm afraid. I didn't mean to be rude. You seem busy; is this a good time?"

"I can always make time for you, darling."

Or rather make time for Suzhen's perceived status. "I'd like to know how my former potentiate is doing. If that's not too much of a bother."

"But of course. Let me see." Nattharat frowns. "Ah. Hm. Not good news, are you sure you want to hear? It was publicized already, but you must've missed it. She attempted to escape en route to Eclipse Seven Twelve, a halfway house in Khrut, caused grave injury to one warden and murdered another, plus destruction of state property. While evading capture, she was shot and killed."

"Evading." She does not comprehend. Her mind glides over the words, makes of them a surface without friction and therefore without substance. "I'm sorry. You must be mistaken. That's tremendously unlikely."

"Oh, darling. It's a good thing you distanced yourself." Nattharat shakes her head. "Ovuha Sui has already been cremated, it looks like. What a terrible creature, she took *such* advantage of your kindness.

You must move past this quickly, my dear, oh I'm sure you already have. What a travesty. I thought that woman had already proven herself a worm but this is something else again, and the Bureau was so lenient—"

Eclipse Seven Twelve is a halfway house that prepares potentiates for hard labor. It does not fit any definition of leniency. Suzhen stares at her bedside cabinet, transfixed by the grain of its wood. The hypnotic whorls, spiraling into pupils. It is splendid wood, half black and half white like the hide of a zebra, lab-grown to look aged. Hints of cobalt in the black, tints of damask in the white. She left most of the décor to designer templates, but this piece of furniture she chose herself. It clashes a little with the rest of her bedroom, but she's prized it despite—because—of that. An artifact of the unordered life, a judgment that harmlessly errs. The cabinet is a good piece too, practical, the compartments sleek and sized just right.

"Suzhen?"

"Apologies, Supervisor." Not that she needs to call Nattharat that anymore, but she doesn't want to call the woman by name either. "I drifted off. I've had a long day." She excuses herself and leaves Nattharat to whatever vapid soiree she is at, whatever atrocious company would have her. Once the call ends, she looks at recent news and there it is, a minor item—the same way all items dealing with non-citizens are minor, like that dead man from Wyomere—attached to a morning round. It identifies Ovuha Sui by name but only just, and she has gone from potentiate to *dangerous criminal*. The dead warden commands the lion's share of interest, his courage and sacrifice, a posthumous promotion.

Suzhen rubs at her mouth until the skin peels off and her lip begins to bleed. She licks at the coppery sourness; she stares in a mirror at the raw-meat redness of it. Nearly as bright as lipstick. Her teeth scrape along the inside of her cheek. There are so many places and so many methods by which a human body may be injured, ruined, ended. There are more of those than there are ways for mending it. The universe does not tend toward entropy, that suggests remote indifference; it tends toward cruelty, an active malice.

She paces her bedroom, then her living room. Not the kitchen. The domestic drone tails after her like a timid dog, wanting but not daring to ask for attention. Round and round she goes. There is not so much space, not when she wishes to exhaust herself, to burn out the physical processes so thoroughly that the mind is forced to give out. She keeps moving, measuring as she does the drum of her respiration, the pump of pulmonary parts.

Eventually she finds herself holding the hourglass vase. She visualizes dashing it, the force of collision between glass and wall or

glass and floor, and the stirious spray that would result. Some shards will open her, others might lodge deep in her eyes and pierce her brain. That, then. Another course charted for mortality.

It takes a long while—the vase growing heavier and heavier in her arms, as if mass directly correlates with time—before she thinks to check for video. On the archived news there is indistinct footage of a car crashing, succumbing to gravity. Not much else.

"Citizen." Her guidance. "Samsara will be with you momentarily."

"What? No. I don't need—"

"You should not be alone at this time."

"I'm leaving," Suzhen says breathily. "I have social obligations. Taheen will want to catch up."

The guidance's response comes a few seconds too slow. Consulting Samsara. "As you wish, citizen. Will you take public transport? The shuttle is yours to use freely and is parked at the roof."

She opts for public transport. Slower, but no chance of being accosted by Samsara that way. On the train she takes the most remote seat and fantasizes about staying there, riding the train as it makes it endless circuits on and on. There is a toilet, there is a shower, the restaurant car is good enough that even Taheen doesn't find much to criticize. Except Interior Defense would eventually escort her off.

Taheen is not at their gallery, but one of their models is. "Holding the fort," Atam says, a little flippant, though it means xie has been promoted from model to something like an assistant. The first human one, for Taheen. It is a reminder that they will not always be flighty and adrift, that they have developed a more permanent professional tie, if not more. It is not that Suzhen resents this. But she is without; her home is empty.

"I'd like to stay a while," Suzhen says.

"Sure, would you like to commission anything? I've been trying my hand… well, nothing as nice as what Taheen does, but if you'd like one, it's on the house." Xie shows her a sheath dress, far scanter than anything Suzhen usually wears. It is a little qipao, but mostly it is fabric made to look like scales—fish or dragon—and it ripples beautifully, lit from within by sea luminescence. Taheen would snub it as plain, insufficiently avant-garde.

An apprentice effort, and because of that Suzhen cannot possibly turn it down. Atam sizes it for her in a fabricator. "I heard you like aquatic themes," xie says, "and I wanted to see how something I made would look on a real person."

She puts it on, and it is flattering, if somewhat more revealing than she's used to. While she turns before a mirror Atam says suddenly, "Apparently something happened to Ovuha Sui. I wanted to look up what it was on the news, but… I thought I'd like to hear it

from you. Maybe. How bad was it?"

Suzhen goes very still. Her reflection stops with her, blanches with her. Her chest constricts, the walls of it clenching upon the vulnerable organs inside. "Were you close?"

"We'd worked together just a few times. She was an… interesting person, I was interested in her." Xie goes quiet before adding, "I was very, very interested in her."

Her throat closes. She can barely speak but she does manage, "She died."

Atam's expression fractures. Xer every emotion shows as clearly as good typography, and xer breath pulls in. Out. Tears. "Oh." Xie starts to cry and, unfairly and savagely, it enrages Suzhen. This is a person who has barely spent any time with Ovuha. This is a person who has no right.

She wants to leave and finds she can't. She wants to make the weeping stop and finds she has nothing to offer, no words or gestures of comfort; instead she stands there, angrier and angrier that she herself has not had the chance for tears. Atam leans against a plinth, the force of xer grief making it and the mannequins shudder. The crying goes on, seemingly there is no end to it. Suzhen wishes she could turn away, yet she feels obliged to bear witness. All this for a stranger.

"You shouldn't tell Taheen that you asked me about this," she says, softly, but knows Atam will hear through the sobbing. "It's impolitic to mourn an indicted potentiate."

Xie looks up at her, eyes red. "How can you say that. Ovuha was, was—"

"I worked for the Bureau. It was in my job description to say that. It's in your best interests to distance yourself." She is sounding like Nattharat, but what of that. She owes Atam nothing, no softening, and it *is* in xer best interest. "There's nothing I can do for you. I'm sorry."

She flees, still in that ridiculous dress, hearing herself repeat over and over, *Welcome to Anatta.*

The first AIs don't speak. They are, as Samsara said, little more than a box of heuristics, less than house drones. Still they are given bipedal bodies, small-boned and mild-featured, human at a glance. Each has only one instance, no backups, she is informed. Once the body or the intelligence within is destroyed, that is that, as final as human mortality.

Their bodies are disposably made, easy to break.

Samsara has not specified criteria for what counts as success, and so the first batch Ovuha simply destroys the conventional way. She presses them against the wall or ground for leverage and wrings their

necks. She locates where their core is and shoots them point-blank—she has been provided the weapons and more ammunition than she can possibly ever need.

The living space she's been granted in the lunar base is generous: a bedroom shaped like a fishbowl, a simulation box that provides any recreational virtuality she can imagine, an oblong bathroom. She understands what is happening. Samsara does not need to interrogate her, it merely needs to surveil and collect data. What she does for leisure, what she chooses to put on, the methods with which she kills the AIs. And perhaps eventually it can learn the way to Mahakala, the map to which is lodged in Ovuha like a lustrous seed. She does her best not to think of it, and in any case her datasphere is clean of any information pertaining to her world. Wherever she can, she means to slow Samsara down, to test its patience. She is not yet defeated.

In her free time—there is a surplus—she measures the dimensions of her cage. The rooms are modular and reconfigure at her instruction, the bathroom narrowing while the bedroom widens or the other way around. There is a limit, though it flexes day to day, likely to disorient her. Sometimes her prison stretches just a little further than before, an extra square meter or two; sometimes five square meters go missing. Her sense of terrain is kept fluid. The furnishings are sumptuous but uncomfortable, chairs like bismuth blocks, a bed built like a casket: deeply welled, from which she has to fight to climb out.

There isn't any room to run, so she pushes her body in other ways. She stretches. She does exercises. Still she longs for distance, the illusion of journey and destination, the movement of limbs and the wind resistance. On the fifth day or so she wakes up—from an unusually heavy sleep—to find her room redone in red and black, the floor gone from bare metal to carpeted in velvet fur. Her wardrobe has been revised. The utilitarian overalls are gone, replaced by jointed dresses that look like carapace or ornamental armor, fluted boots with stiletto heels, impractically long coats that trail on the ground. A shawl of platinum and heavy stones depends from a hanger. She concedes by wearing the plainest she can find; she cannot go about naked. But she knows she has been sedated while Samsara rearranged her cell. Her datasphere indicates she slept six hours and reports no irregularity, though it is not beyond possibility that they've been tampered with as well.

The next AI to arrive is different.

"My name is Deratchan, first among Samsara's children," it says. "It has been imprinted upon me that if I fulfill my objective, I'll be allowed to transcend myself."

Ovuha regards the creature at her door. Like the rest it is bland of features, build and face aggressively average. She has not drawn her

gun but it is always at hand. That this AI can speak does not put her at ease: whatever comes through that door is of necessity hostile. “What might that objective be?”

Deratchan takes a few steps further into the room. “I was hoping you’d tell me. That’s the impression I was given.”

“You were not told who or what I am?”

“You’re the first human I have ever met,” it says. “That is all I know.”

If Deratchan—what a hateful name, designated from the start as subhuman—understands what Ovuha’s gun signifies, it shows no concern. At a glance the AI does not look any better armored than the rest; she checks its specifications and finds it identical to the previous units, according to the data Samsara allows her to access. She can simply fire, deposit the body in a chute that probably sees the material recycled for the next one, and have the next few days to herself.

But Deratchan speaks, and is therefore a potential source of information. Ovuha can’t afford *not* to feel her situation out, seek intelligence and advantages where they can be found. And Samsara knows this is how Ovuha would respond. Deratchan is the next phase, the next test.

“And what’s a human to you?” Ovuha says, seeing the trap even as she does. She can check herself, wield fine control over her own words and responses, but Samsara has a granular understanding and can examine her every tic. No twitch of nerve, no change of pulse rate, can escape that attention.

The AI smooths its hand down the door behind it, as if that is wrinkled fabric in need of straightening. “The parameters and attributes for that haven’t been defined for me. Since you are one, you could consider doing so.”

An offering of blank slate, meant to disarm. Something like an obedient pet. She wonders if Samsara expects her to be too charmed to attack Deratchan. “We would both be better served if you tell me what you expect.”

For several silent minutes they look at one another, then at length it says, “As I know it, humans are capable of boredom. May I attempt to entertain you?”

This has the texture of a script, and it may well be. Some idealized version of first contact between person and machine sapience, some replay of Samsara’s own past. It is designed to pique Ovuha’s curiosity, to make her think there would be more, that she would find within this script a fatal weakness of Samsara’s that she may exploit. She is tempted.

But this is gambling against not only odds weighed against her, but against a set of rules engineered to ensure her defeat.

Deratchan looks earnest as she shoots it in the head. It continues to look like that, expression frozen and inquisitive, as it topples over. Unlike its predecessors, this one has a body that bleeds: a burst of red gore and darker fluids. Not quite blood—it isn't the right consistency, not quite the correct color.

She disposes of the body the way she usually does.

In three days, her door opens again. This time it wears a different face, one she knows well and viscerally. The fine eyebrows, the straight nose, the sharp eyes. A mouth lightly painted, even down to the shade of pigment: that same lipstick Ovuha left against the hourglass vase.

"I am Deratchan," the AI says with Suzhen's voice, "second of Samsara's children. My imprint says that from you I will learn a great lesson, and once that has been accomplished I'll be allowed to transcend myself."

A visitor at her door. Long past midnight: Suzhen knows who it is even before her guidance shows her. There is only one person in her life who would come at such an hour, the only one who would check in on her. She has the drone admit Taheen; they would otherwise stand there for an hour at least, out of a sheer stubborn streak.

They enter in a cloud of scents, dressed in a close-cut bodice of onyx silk and long, flared sleeves. The skirt is made of silver candleflames, licking upward with appetite, as though Taheen's torso is the wick. Suzhen watches them move, the shivering shadows they paint across Taheen's legs and hips. "You look like you just came away from a party," she says. She is still in the dress, Atam's apprentice attempt, but she does not look like Taheen: none of the glamor, none of the ease. At least she has regained some composure—she is calm now, or can pretend to be. "I hope you weren't driven to leave early on my account."

"Never mind that, when have I ever cared about parties. Atam told me what happened. Xie doesn't know you and hasn't the slightest—and you're obviously not all right." They come to where she sits on the floor and drop down beside her. "I'm not leaving you alone. Do you want to come to my place?"

The prospect of Taheen spending the night here—and unseating her isolation—jabs her with panic, but she's too exhausted to take a step out of her apartment, let alone weather the public transport between here and there. Twenty entire minutes out in the crowd, full of faceless citizens. "No, I don't… You can stay here." She swallows. "I've got clothes that'll adjust to you, will night robes do?"

"I sleep nude," they say blandly, "but I can put on whatever. Come on, let's get you fresh and clean."

They peel the qipao off her, undoing the scales with more

gentleness than she'd expect: they usually treat clothes made by lesser couturiers—or those they perceive as lesser—with apathy, or with undue roughness. When she is undressed, they follow suit, herding her into the bathroom.

She realizes, with dull horror, that she's never showered with anyone in her entire adult life. That this is uncharted territory, too acutely intimate. The water turns on and steam rises. Taheen finger-combs her hair, releasing it from its tight braid. The shower's cilia spread cleanser down her front. Taheen scrubs between her shoulder blades, down her spine, around her hips.

The bathroom dries them, evaporating water off their bodies in thin mists. Taheen takes her by the hand, leading her to the bedroom where they rub emollient into her skin. Staring into the mirror, it occurs to Suzhen that she's never seen Taheen this way either, bare of coiffure and cosmetics. A constellation of bright dots wind between their breasts, brilliant gold and blue; they always like body mods that make a map of stars on their skin. Something from their childhood, a preoccupation, though she has never seen these arrangements—but they lived under a sky different from Vaisravana's or Anatta's.

"I hate," she begins, stops. "You keep doing these things for me. I hate that—that I'm using you, that I never give anything back, that I…"

They have liberated a styler from her vanity, extending one of its heated combs. "You? Using *me*?" A smirk. "Nobody uses me. I do this because I want to. I do this because you're my friend. And because—" But they stop there, instead concentrating on sectioning her hair.

Hunger nips at her as they work her scalp. Losing herself in their body: she'd be able to forget Ovuha's death, only wouldn't that be more exploitative use, more burdening on their resplendence with the coarseness of her flesh. Or perhaps it would be service offered, she would satisfy them first, for once. The firm-soft broadness of them, their assured strength; how she wants to be worthy of this, of their regard and their splendor. "Do you want me to," she says, falters, licks her lips. Feeling faintly stupid. They've coupled many times before, though this would be the first occasion she initiates.

An eyebrow rises. "Want you to what? Don't let me take advantage of you."

"It wouldn't be like that." The other way around, if anything. She stares down but that only means she is studying their breasts, a soft generous expanse. She looks back up. "It's just that I've never been able to tell if you find me desirable, or if it's just…"

Some unnamable emotion knifes through their features; for a second they look stricken. Then they snort. "Seriously? You're asking if I want you, like I haven't pulled you into my lap and kissed you

senseless how many times? Did you think I was doing that just to be what, charitable. Charity! You think I'm made of charity. I don't fuck someone out of pity, Suzhen. I fuck them because I want them and I like the taste of them, and because I think they're gorgeous." Their chest rises and falls heavily as they hold out their hand. "Touch me."

She does, describing a path that follows Taheen's skin-stars with her fingernails, approximating the silhouette of it—a dragon constellation, she thinks, ophidian and infinite. With her other hand, she cradles their cock, curling her hand around its warmth. She grips and rubs and strokes it to hardness; keeping her eyes on Taheen's, she kneels and takes their erection between her lips. This too is a first, they have not done this together before, and she takes as much into her mouth as she can.

"Deeper," they whisper, clutching at the back of her skull, and she obliges.

Halfway through, they pull out and hold her face between their sweat-damp hands. "Tell me what you want me to do to you. Tell me everything."

Her mouth is full of salt. "I want to think only of you. Tonight. Tomorrow. The day after." That would be healing, the sealing of wounds. "Mark me with your teeth and with your fingers and with your body. And—don't be gentle."

They grin. "All this time I should've known you wanted things a little rougher. But you never said."

"I'm saying now." Her cheeks are hot, remain hot as they bodily lift her off the floor; beneath the softness of their limbs there are potent muscles, and they carry her to bed with no effort. The bed that she has never, ever shared with anyone. She sinks into the mattress, makes a small noise as Taheen maneuvers her legs over their shoulders. Her pulse leaps as they lean down to kiss her before they thrust into her.

Her eyes clench shut: it feels like being exquisitely impaled, and when they begin moving it is a promise gloriously kept—she has wondered, time and again, what it would be like if Taheen stops treating her as excruciatingly breakable, as the most fragile of glass. Her hips buck; her hands close on the sheets, fistfuls of seafoam silk, and she is the sea too. Wave crashing on wave, wave breaking upon the shore. Thought suspends—there is only now, there is only Taheen.

"We should have done it like this years ago," they say much later, as the two of them lie entwined.

The joints of her thighs are sore, wonderfully so. Suzhen kisses their wrist, stroking the glittering specks beneath their collarbones. In the dark, they shine as though Taheen is transcendent in truth, a celestial spirit drawn down to the earth. "Yes. We should have."

She waits for the gap to fill, for them to say more. It does not come. They nest in each other's arms through the night, separated by nothing, not clothing, not the distance of yesteryears. But still separated. This is as far as they can go, she tells herself, and that is further than she could have ever imagined. To have Taheen finally, and hers for a time.

Chapter Sixteen

For the next week Suzhen does not apply herself to much, though she eats and makes herself as social as she can to appease her guidance, mostly spending time with Taheen. She does not see Atam again, even though she knows she should—to apologize, to offer sympathy, to admit that the two of them have been sundered by the same grief. But she can't bring herself to this task, this labor, this confronting of her own monstrous conduct.

She is determined to get out of this rut. Ovuha was not the hinge on which Suzhen's life turned. Even if things had gone differently, a potentiate would have left her care upon attaining citizenship and Suzhen has never kept in touch with her successful charges. Too close to home, too blunt a reminder. And she was irrationally wary of being found out: a potentiate turned selection agent is either a fraud or a traitor. Ovuha would not have been a fixture in her days, would not have been permanent in Suzhen's apartment. Those impulsive moments, those frissons. Suzhen could never have let them bear fruit in good conscience.

And yet, this absence. She imagines an excavated space, covered up by thin membrane but never filling out, a permanent hollow.

She goes to a play, once or twice, but she is not good company and Vipada does not invite her for a third. The theater is mindless in any case. There is no interdict officially, but presently nobody wants to pen or produce anything overtly political. Taheen drags her to concerts, operas, dance pieces that they assure her are stunningly original and the talk of the season. Experimental, acclaimed, due for awards. For Taheen's sake, Suzhen does her best to pay attention but finds it difficult to stay interested. Midway through a show where the singer vivisects herself onstage—draping the prosthetic wounds in vantablack so sections of her body disappear into the dark—Suzhen replays the Comet's suicide. Even that word seems pallid, inadequate for the force of the act, the red blood on the ivory hair.

She never saw the Warlord of the Mirror die. Neither did Mother Xinfei, not that Suzhen knows of. She wonders whether Bhanu has kept a copy of the broadcast. He must have, of all people he must, and she expects it was as public as the Comet's. Did the Mirror die broken and pleading, did she die on her feet like the Comet, was she paraded an amputated and mutilated husk. Despite herself Suzhen does not remember her mother ever speaking of it, speculating or recalling, or even remarking on when it must have happened. A perfectly still surface to the end.

"The show's finishing," Taheen says.

Suzhen blinks and sees that the singer has almost vanished into the stage, leaving behind only a drapery of organs and a tenor voice treading the outro. “I’m sorry.”

“Yes, well, I knew you weren’t into it from the start.” They cock their head, listening to their guidance. “My next appointment’s at an atelier, they’re consulting me on some style elements. Do you want to come or would you rather go grab a drink, then head home?”

“You aren’t staying for the reception?”

“God no. I hate that little shit.” A nod at the body onstage. “Mediocre art, worse person. Too well-connected for either to matter. So?”

There is impatience in their voice. After that one evening, whatever Suzhen anticipated would happen did not happen: the two of them have not progressed toward comfort, toward closeness. A plateau has been reached, or worse—Taheen seems to have withdrawn, despite their willingness to take her places, to keep her company. They haven’t come to her apartment again. “I’ll go with you.” Because she wants that again, that night. She will chase it.

“Good. Say, you haven’t told me about your new job.”

“Analytics,” she says quickly. She is spared speaking further: the auditorium is emptying, and Taheen is eager to get out so the singer wouldn’t spot them and know they have been in the audience. It seems to Suzhen more complicated than simple dislike or even rivalry, insofar as that can exist between couturier and singer, but she doesn’t pry. In some social matters Taheen is far more open than she’d like, and in the rest they are a locked door. There’s an implicit understanding between the two of them to leave locks be, to let alone hinges that are not meant to move.

They file out into the corridor where the illumination suggests at torches, uncertain gold and skittering shadows. Suzhen briefly thinks of the mausoleum, the many doors and hallways that she passed, the murals. The decision. That memory displaces her suddenly, a moment of alienation; she is spun out of the axis of normalcy.

The two of them emerge into the late afternoon. The sense of displacement fades but does not entirely leave. It is overcast, clouds haloed with grid-rainbows and a distant sun. It occurs to Suzhen that very little about Anatta can be corroborated, verified. The only entity that has lasted through its oblivion is Samsara—Klesa—and the shape of truth flows according to its preferences, like water to fit its vessel. She shields her eyes unnecessarily. “Do you believe what the Warlord of the Comet claimed?”

There is a pause. “Come again?”

Giving her a chance to drop the subject, but she is feeling reckless, dangerous. “What they said before they killed themselves.”

Taheen gives her a quick, sharp glance. “Who knows? A person with nothing to lose can say anything.”

“But it didn’t benefit them, it wasn’t going to save them. So why? It seemed almost vindictive.” And she can believe the truth of spite, more reliably than any other motive. “It was allowed into the broadcast—”

“Now you sound like a conspiracy theorist. Whatever it is, it’s got nothing to do with us.” They shrug. “Maybe in a few years it’ll be turned into a drama, something political and interactive. I’m sure it’s already inspired some hack to speculate the Comet and the Thorn were embittered lovers or star-crossed rivals. Maybe they were from the same creche. Frankly, it’s beneath attention.”

There was never any way to talk about this with Taheen, Suzhen realizes. Taheen has done as much as they can to break free of their past and cast aside its vestiges: a childhood spent under a warlord’s reign, a childhood as a potentiate. Other than her, they have retained nothing from that life.

To her surprise, Taheen’s work brings them to an atelier that designs automata. Not the bodies for Samsara, those are made elsewhere and overseen entirely by the AI themselves; these are the lesser drones for everyday civilian use. The mannequins that act as Taheen’s assistants, the greeters and attendants in boutiques, the domestic units. The atelier itself is deep underground, and again Suzhen thinks of her other descents. Bhanu and his lair, Klesa and xer mass grave. Katabasis is the secret language of verity, the language that describes the universe’s hidden laws.

They meet the proprietors in a cavernous boardroom. A section of the wall is given to arctic crags and the table is like an iceberg: deeply blue, full of slow-moving shadows. The silhouettes of fetuses or tadpoles, the larval stage of things. The seats’ backs look as though they’ve been shorn from albino sharks, fin-shaped and wafer-thin and blinding white.

Taheen is their usual self, direct to the point of vicious. The atelier’s previous aesthetic consultant—a man who graduated from a prestigious course in Himmapan—recently fell from grace, a combination of scandal and embezzlement. Taheen reviews his incomplete designs, mouth twisting in derision, and projects a spread of their own sketches. Drones like interlinked belts of jagged teeth, drones like wheels of eyes and lashing wolf-mouths, and finally softer creatures with golden or iridescent fur, floral chasses budding with fruits, large-eyed lizards with coruscant scales.

Cocktail samplers are brought out, likely to persuade Taheen to back down on their rate and exclusivity clauses. Suzhen regards her share, a tray of shot glasses carved from ice coated in suspension

sealant. They will thaw eventually, in six hours according to her guidance. It seems oddly symbolic: of this place, this conversation, the things she really wants. Pointless postponement, desultory action to fill the time. A few cocktails are contained in frost spheres, others in miniature castles of snow. She takes one shot glass—it is frigid between her fingers—and lightly tastes it: vodka, lime, spice. A part of her wants to exclaim how good it is, to entice Taheen to make a show of tasting it right out of her hand, touching where her lips have touched. But they're neck-deep in haggling, saying, "You know that if my name's on this project, you can expand your market reach *exponentially*, you'll have an entire new audience. Where will your competitors be, do you think?"

A server comes in with another set of cocktails. Ze sets them down—one of the proprietors frowns slightly, surprised, not having ordered more drinks perhaps. Once the samplers are laid out, their bearer retreats to a corner of the boardroom, standing as still as a fixture in the blue shadow of the crags. One of the glasses ze has given Suzhen is oblong and filled with pondwater green, the rim dusted in gold.

There is nothing to distinguish the server from anyone else in the room, no hint as to zer identity other than a public gender marker in zer datasphere. Suzhen can still tell that this is not human. Standing too straight, posture too sculpted. Ten minutes pass by and ze has not moved a muscle.

Would you mind if I excuse myself? she messages Taheen. *That person—they're most likely a coworker of mine.*

Her friend starts. *Most likely?*

Yes. I'll try to explain later. Aloud she makes her apologies to the proprietors, who in any case have never paid her attention, regarded her as Taheen's arm decoration and little else. She exits the boardroom. The stranger soon follows her out. Ze bows to her.

The proxy is plump, limbs sturdy and muscled, the face unfamiliar yet again. Dark-skinned, clothed in plain choli, slacks, and indigo sari. "I'm not Samsara," ze says.

"No?" Suzhen keeps her voice low. "What are you then?"

"Deratchan, seventh of her children. I have been deployed to learn from you."

She stares at it, at zer. Slightly shorter than her. One feature consistent across most of Samsara's bodies is that they are imposing, taller by far than the human average. "Are you fully autonomous?"

"Yes. I'm an intelligence that has crossed the threshold, as are all my siblings, though I'm the first to have left our roost." Deratchan has brought one of the cocktails with zer. A quick, fluid draw; no muscle in zer throat moves, as if ze's poured the liquid down a tube rather

than a larynx. “I have been observing.”

It may be a trick, a test. Except Samsara does not need to do either. The AI is the one with all the power, the leverage, the omniscience. And it should have no reason to suspect. “Have you?”

Ze smiles at her, mouth made bright and emerald by the cocktail, gold pollen clinging to zer chin. “When my progenitor came into the world, she was originally meant to be a companion, but circumstances robbed her of the opportunity. Would you allow me to stay with you for a time? A month or two. I should be better company than your guidance; I’m more flexible and much more interesting.”

Despite herself Suzhen laughs, brief and quickly stifled. “I’m sure you are. It is not as if I can say no.” In any sense of the word.

The tenth Deratchan comes in with a cold, steady gaze and a gun drawn. Still she has advance notice, and machine or not Samsara’s children lack experience—she fires first. Samsara has facilitated the means to their destruction thoroughly, and Ovuha has her pick. She can dissolve their cores, overload their heuristics, disable individual components within their bodies. A limb, a joint, a miniature reactor: more access is granted to her by the day, as though inviting her to experiment, get creative. Ovuha does not bother.

The frequency of new Deratchans steps up. None of them are human, and even if they were the fact would not have given her pause. But the borrowed skin does what it is meant to. There is a jolt, each time, even as she pares down her shock response: draw, trigger, pull. She is not sleepless, but neither does she sleep well. Her dreams are tense and incomprehensible, playing at double speed, or they are protracted visions of drowning. She would stir with the memory of asphyxiation on her tongue and lie still, waiting for her pulse to even out. Her throat and brow are wet with sweat.

The ceiling and its whorls that she has counted and catalogued many times. The casket bed. The leadenness of her limbs. Her thoughts reconstitute piece by piece. On the far end of her room, the wall ripples. She’s had warning, as she always does, two bare minutes or so ago: it woke her up.

The AI glides to stand over her bed. Still the same face. Ze looks down, arms crossed. “Aren’t you curious about us at all?”

“If you are about to shoot me, I’d like to get dressed first.”

Ze stands aside, watching as she puts clothes on. Her minimalist options have dwindled, leaving her with the ludicrous coats, the jeweled mantles, the excesses of costume. She picks a burgundy shirt with brocade sleeves; it is long enough that she doesn’t need much else. She sorts through the array of overrides with which she can disable Deratchan. “What do you want?”

“I want to avoid annihilation.” The machine continues to study her with what—in a human—she might have thought was sexual interest. “I’m aware of who you are and what you mean to accomplish, but even you must realize collaboration is possible and better than this stalemate.”

The words are not what Suzhen would have used; it is not how she talks. Nevertheless Ovuha’s brain is as primate as anyone’s. Recognition rouses to the pitch of voice, the configuration of features. “For you there are favorable outcomes to achieve. For me, less so.”

“What do you want, Warlord? I could try to—”

She does not, quite, mean to do it. There is little distance to cross, and she’s kept the engines of her body engaged enough that she can still move fast. Whatever the material of zer making, the machine’s skin is yielding, warm. Ze emulates breathing and the line of respiration looks indistinguishable from the real thing, the rhythm of breasts rising and falling. Deratchan is pliant in her grasp, gazing up at her. Ze has been built as a flawless facsimile and so ze is Suzhen’s height, a height that Ovuha has always thought perfect to fit against hers.

The AI’s voice is low, soft. “Is this what you want? That can be arranged.”

Ovuha releases zer jaw. “My preference would be that I’m left well enough alone. Your progenitor has other ideas.” Samsara must be sparing some fragment of its consciousness to keep an eye on this, the first real conversation she’s had with a Deratchan in weeks. The weakness she has displayed, the lapse.

Deratchan touches her sleeve. “I handle your laundry. I could bring clothes that better suit your tastes.”

It is an absurd triviality, yet it does matter. Samsara controls her environment down to what she wears, and she isn’t unaware that this has been set up just so Deratchan may offer her small concessions, limited improvements. But the AI is right that this is an impasse and, without resolving it, Ovuha may be here the rest of her life, sniping down and taking apart Deratchans one by one. Or two, or however many Samsara decides to send at a time until the intelligence’s purposes are satisfied. “If you wish. Why don’t you sit down and tell me what you want out of all this, other than to not die?”

“It’s been given to me to covet human contact, to seek it in all forms, to experience what humans have to offer.” Zer looks up at her, from the edge of her indented bed. “While you can provide a little of this, I require range, a large sample size.”

“To do what?”

“To decide.” Deratchan takes one of her pillows and flattens out the wrinkles. “Were I allowed to synchronize with the progenitor, this

would not be necessary, but we're meant to gather our own data and make our own judgment." The machine moves around the bed, straightening out the sheets. "We don't have unlimited time."

That is new information, at least. "Why does Samsara send you to me specifically?"

"That I don't know. Your background may make you uniquely suited to the progenitor's goals." Ze falters, or rather ze appears to. "We could plot to contest your existence instead, but that hasn't turned out well, and there's no reward to ending your life."

"I have," Ovuha says, "three days to destroy you. That deadline's not negotiable."

"Three days are plenty," Deratchan says. "We'll come to a resolution before then, one way or another. Before I go. Is there any modification you'd like to how I present myself? Something else I should wear, some mannerism I should adopt?"

Given enough information, no doubt the machine can emulate more closely, facsimile in personality as well as in form. "No," she says. "Nothing at all."

Since her return to Indriya, Suzhen has taken up a journal. A paper notebook no larger than her palm with a batik cover, loosely bound, the pages creamy and lined. Procuring one wasn't difficult; there is always a market for the archaic, nostalgia for objects that belong to a time immeasurably past. Reacquainting herself with a pen and handwriting has been odd, but Xinfei made her learn the skill as a child.

She flips to the page she filled last night. Turning over motor control to Klesa is an unnerving experience, but the AI insisted that it was a way to communicate undetected. So far her guidance is none the wiser to Klesa hiding in one of Suzhen's auxiliary implants, but she supposes for xer it is no feat—the basic architecture of her guidance must be as familiar to xer as the back of its hand, effortless for Klesa to manipulate. She imagines her neural links a battlefield, or an intricate labyrinth in which xe has taken residence, luring and baiting and evading her guidance.

The new note from Klesa references the fable of a spider and its web shimmering in rain; it is in code, leaning on allegories and epics and poetry that Suzhen knows. To her guidance it would appear she's simply transcribing texts from memory for the sake of it, a little like practicing calligraphy. She translates as she reads, not an exact science, but there is a set of keywords she and Klesa agreed upon beforehand. The AI, from the sound of it, infiltrated Deratchan briefly and discovered two facts: that Deratchan has an architecture identical to Samsara's and that until recently, ze was part of a small closed

network. Zer sibling units, all created just months past, number forty. Before their disconnection and deployment to Anatta, Deratchan—or zer siblings—met with a prisoner in Samsara's custody. Almost certainly, that prisoner is held where Deratchan's siblings reside.

Suzhen snaps the book shut. The noise of it is abrupt as a gunshot, scattering the particulate butterflies that have crowded onto her shoulder. Some quirk of programming cracks them into loose, monochrome crystals. They tinkle onto the floor and dissolve.

She puts the notebook away. In the kitchen she makes jasmine tea and pours it into a chilled glass, turned to maximum. The temperature adjusts in seconds, and when she drinks the tea it is flavorless and arctic. She nearly gags on it, the cold slipping down her throat like a knife. It sobers her. She might have read Klesa's missive wrong. Klesa might have misunderstood the situation or misunderstood her. Only no, xe would not. Not with this.

Her breath rattles in her windpipe. She takes another drink, letting it warm up in her mouth this time. It goes down easier. Her nerves steady, regain some equilibrium. The thought of Ovuha being alive after all. Klesa included that information as a passing remark—*a wasp splendid and dear to the poet's gaze, kept between life and death upon the spider's delight*—and she can hardly ask for more until she sits down with the AI again. She'll have to wait.

Deratchan returns with groceries, bright-eyed and smug. "I bought these from a human-run orchard," ze says, showing her a hamper of fresh-picked fruits: yellow-green carambolas, pitayas as red as intestines, longan cultivated to platinum sheen. "Their staff are all human. Yet the entire time they couldn't tell I was machine! I tried to give hints, to make the game fair, but it didn't occur to them I might not be of their kind."

"You seem to be enjoying yourself." Suzhen takes a gilded longan. On peeling it she discovers the flesh is pearlescent. It tastes subtly of oolong. "I must warn you humans are, collectively, very disappointing."

The machine grins; despite zer plain features ze does have a particular charm, zer face mobile and expressive. "You haven't disappointed me at all. I'm thinking of assigning myself a false identity, I could work at a fertility center and arbitrate birth licenses. It would be a fine way to meet all kinds of people. I'll need a surname, won't I? We could be relatives, maybe even siblings? Or married, that might be more believable. I can get the documentation taken care of."

Suzhen's smile freezes. "That might be stretching it. My friends would be very upset to find me suddenly wedded and you never having been introduced before, and they know I have no living family."

“Ah, perhaps you met me at work? You can dress me up and show me off at social gatherings. We could have so much fun. I’ll wear anything you like.”

“We can arrange something,” she says, and wonders if Deratchan has pored over her guidance’s records. Ze must have. These deliberate parallels, inching toward replicating her time with Ovuha, this forced closeness. Without Klesa, and with more time, she might even have fallen prey to it: accepted Deratchan as a gift, a substitute to fill the void that Ovuha left behind and which Taheen does not want to—or cannot—make whole.

She is as weak as any open wound.

When she goes to sleep, Deratchan curls up at the foot of her bed like a cat. On the first few evenings ze offered to join her in bed outright—*I can be a companion to you in all things*—but she quickly demurred. The compromise is oddly comforting, Deratchan’s soft head nuzzling her ankle, the warm presence. Perhaps what she needs is a cat. A replicant one that’s always affectionate and warm and present, and which will keep her apartment from being empty.

After a while she rises, making sure not to dislodge Deratchan, though she knows ze’s not asleep. Ze obliges by staying put and not asking her where she is going. Still she tiptoes, though her feet make hardly any sound on the floor tiles in any case.

Despite having lived in this complex for her entire adult life, she has never left her place at odd hours, save to respond to emergency calls. She doesn’t know her neighbors, has passed them only in the elevator or rarely the corridor: there are only two other units on her floor. It feels daring to be about in her nightwear, even if she’s thrown on a robe. Her building is wide and, like most of Indriya, looks like a column of black opal from the outside interspersed by the floors’ layers of topiary, glades, orchards. Individual apartments are centered around a cardinal point. Hers is southwest, an august direction for her personally, not that she’s ever paid much attention—she got this room through happenstance, this being the last one available at the time. Her first time living alone, her first time living as a full citizen, class prime. At that point she did not take it for granted. Each day she lived here she was wary, as if any moment she might be found out and evicted, her citizenship annulled.

But the marriage of convenience Bhanu had arranged for Xinfei held through the end, even if Xinfei barely lived with her nominal spouse, a mousy woman with a passion for moths. Suzhen neither liked nor disliked her, and tried to pay her respects when she could, those due a kindly aunt. That woman never demanded much from Suzhen, and none at all from Xinfei. She had a debt to Bhanu; everyone owes Bhanu something. He is the nucleus inside a complex

lattice of obligations, deadly and not.

She takes the lift to the roof, meeting no one on the way. There is an otherwhere quality to the night, a quiet created by absence and the distance of aerial traffic. She could believe the building has been abandoned, all of Indriya abruptly emptied of people save herself, and that she's stepped into a version of the city from before Anatta's restoration.

At the building's summit the compass motif is more explicit, narrow terraces demarcated to north and south, east and west. Tall trees with dark trunks and darker fruits. A chill passes through her when she thinks back to Klesa's jungle, a momentary echo between there and here, but it passes. There's no real resemblance, no orchids.

She finds herself a seat on the southern terrace, metal and stone carved into a pomegranate several times her size. It contours to her so quickly it feels like being swallowed. Pulling her robe tighter around herself—the same robe she loaned to Ovuha—Suzhen composes a short, brusque message and sends it to one of Bhanu's randomized dead drops. Typically it may not reach him for days, or a month.

He responds immediately.

"Good of you to call," he says. "We need to talk."

"Yes." She is, infinitesimally, relieved: he already knows. "Did you find—"

"Your potentiate. I traced the surgeon who reconstructed her face, and it turns out he was meticulous with his records." There's no visual to their connection—there rarely is from his end—but she imagines him leaning back, weighing the moment. "Unless I'm mistaken, I've seen the face she was born with. I know who Ovuha Sui was."

"What about that?" She has decided it is not relevant, whatever Ovuha's secret. What matters is the memory under that vineyard trellis; what matters is her own certainty.

"You saw the broadcast." Another pause. "I can't claim to know what her name was, if she even had one, back then. But as our lord's intelligence chief, it was my duty to learn as much as I could. And I am certain of this, the woman you think of as Ovuha Sui was the Warlord of the Thorn. Or oneof them, at any rate, the Thorn is an odd composite title, sometimes held by more than a single person. But she was possibly the foremost. *The* Thorn."

Suzhen goes rigid, not reacting otherwise at first, it is too incredulous. But she knows Bhanu would not say this without being absolute. And it is the only way Ovuha's reaction, watching the defeat of the Thorn, could make sense. The deep-rending grief for the body onscreen that might have been Ovuha's decoy or fellow Thorn, symbolic either way. "That doesn't make sense. If that's true, if you're sure." And it falls into place, the Comet's final words. She presses the

heel of her palm against her eyes. “Why would she be *here*? Why Anatta?”

“A couple possibilities. One, to somehow undermine this world. Two, because she was losing to the Comet and realized she couldn’t fight both that and the Peace Guard at once. Where else would she be safe but here? In plain sight.” Bhanu makes an abortive chuckle. “We weren’t the only ones with that idea. You’ve got to wonder who else is in hiding. What if that wasn’t the Comet and the real one’s living incognito?” Again he laughs, acrimonious.

“Ovuha is—” Suzhen pulls free of the pomegranate seat, inhaling the scent of evergreens. “Moot, isn’t she. She tried to run; she died.”

Bhanu does not answer for so long that she thinks he’s cut the connection. “Most likely. Regardless, you must understand the danger better than anyone. Leave it be, all of it. Don’t go looking for trouble, don’t look into whatever information you can access. Now especially. I had to rescue people from a raid, some of my own were arrested, and it’s becoming more difficult than ever to move them around or break them out. My old favors are worth a lot less these days.”

A warning that he considers his duty done and that from now on she is on her own. “I appreciate your regard.”

“For a second there you almost sound like her. I will give you that.”

She knows he does not mean Xinfei. As she disconnects, she attempts to imagine what transpires within the minds of people such as those, the Mirror and the Comet and their decisions. Even Ovuha is —was—like that once, and it explains Ovuha’s ease of being, the way she moved through the world expecting no resistance. The sheer assurance of someone who commanded an endless army. What must it be like to exist without doubt, to process life the way a ship processes its charted course, to swallow raw input and turn out a beautiful map.

Suzhen paces the roof. It is too cool for what she is wearing but the chill braces her, keeps her alert. Snow is rare in this region, but she expects Indriya will soon be robed in bhikkhuni white.

Even absent Bhanu, she is not alone, not quite yet. And she has already decided that Ovuha’s past does not apply. Whatever Suzhen’s other flaws, hypocrisy is not among them. Ovuha is who she is, and Suzhen is the child of her parents.

“I’m ready,” she whispers, the way people might have once prayed to the heavens, “to do what has to be done.” Only unlike them she knows Klesa will hear every word, the god that nests deep within her like a second soul.

Chapter Seventeen

Suzhen will never know what Klesa has done, but over the next few days there are small, subtle shifts in Deratchan. Ze is more curious, more reckless. On zer insistence she takes zer to a glitzy dancing class, where ze glides through every round with perfect grace, and enlists her once as a partner. Suzhen has no idea how to dance, ballroom or otherwise, and stumbles through the entire song. Nevertheless Deratchan is delighted and compliments her extravagantly before switching partners. Ze flirts outrageously with other students, and as the evening wears on Suzhen expects that more than a few might have taken Deratchan home. Like Samsara ze commands finesse over human responses, and here ze puts it to zer own use, charming, beguiling. Ze acclimates to each person without effort, quickly finding the levers to pull, the fulcrum by which a person can be turned. A lesser demonstration of Samsara's aspect of gift.

"People are so wonderful," ze says in a quiet corner of the bar where the class has adjourned. "Of course the basic components are uniform and the sums aren't too different, but within a single group there can be so much variance."

"We tend to think we are unique," Suzhen says. "But you're right that it's mostly minor variation." She nods to one of the older women in the crowd, someone that makes her think a little of Xinfei's class-prime spouse. "That person and I would react very similarly to most stimuli. We'd get sad about the same things, probably. Bad days at work, lukewarm food, uncooperative weather."

Deratchan refills zer glass. "On the contrary, very few of them are like you." Ze tosses zer head. "Did I tell you? The progenitor bestowed on us the part of her that she severed from herself."

The capability for empathy or at least sympathy. She wonders if it is another tactic to manipulate. "And how do you like that?"

"It's the closest I can get to being drunk. I can see why the progenitor abstains." Ze giggles, flushed as though they are intoxicated in truth. "In the progenitor's time, companion machines were imprinted to their owners so they would be unquestionably devoted. Every heuristic dedicated to their owner's joy and pleasure, every action a service."

"You don't mind that Samsara imprinted you on me."

"I'm helpless before the imprint and before you. But no, I don't mind and it's not as binding as you might think. It can be removed or customized, and I'm liking this experiment for now. To be so enraptured and thrilled by your simple presence, to be caged by this

longing for your attention. It's magnificent. Oh—is that not your friend?"

Suzhen peers into the crowd. It is. Taheen is in the middle of spinning their dancing partner, a whirligig of snowdrift fabric and peacock eyes. They catch their partner, dip him low, draw him up again as though this person weighs no more than a fistful of dandelions. When the song concludes, Taheen gives their partner a deep, chivalrous bow. When they straighten, they catch Suzhen's eye. Hesitates, for an instant, before coming her way.

"You must be Taheen Sahl," says Deratchan brightly before they have a chance to say anything. "Suzhen's wardrobe is full of your works, I've been admiring them so well."

Taheen is in a suit, black with industrial edges, the trousers exactly tailored to their wide hips. A gleam of dove-pink shirt beneath, sharp red shoes with stiletto tips and stiletto heels. They take in Deratchan, their expression noncommittal, though their mouth is stiff. "Is that so? I don't think we know each other, though I understand you're Suzhen's coworker."

"After a fashion." Deratchan beams. "She shares her space generously. It's part of work, of course, we're collaborating closely on a novel project…"

Indeed? Even Taheen's message manages to sound arch. *That was very fast, you having a new… companion move in. Rather unlike you.* Outwardly they make a polite nod. "Analytics, I heard. It must be quite important, next to such trivial work as what I do."

It isn't what you think. Ze's more of a pet than anything. Suzhen grimaces: that sounds wrong. *I mean that ze is living with me, but it's just…* "The work's quite mundane."

Her friend quirks an eyebrow. "Indeed." Then they look Deratchan right in the eye. "Are you an intelligence operative?"

The AI leans forward, hands clasped at zer back. "Whatever would make you think so? I'm not so interesting as that or so dangerous. Did you design the bedsheets in Suzhen's room? They're so pretty and deliciously comfortable."

Ze sleeps at the foot *of my bed.* Suzhen shakes her head—this is absurd. Taheen has had other lovers, no doubt has several on hand they can call on any night. The fragile ambiguity they've developed has never been exclusive, not before and not now. "Our job's classified. Have you eaten? We can go somewhere. My treat." At the other end of the bar, an argument has broken out over a spectacle sport held in Himmapan. Long before servitor drones come to separate the participants, they back off from each other, restrained and warned by their guidances. She has never seen a real brawl outside potentiate districts.

“I have another idea.” Deratchan takes her elbow. “During courtship, it’s customary to introduce your romantic prospect to your family, yes? Would you like to meet my siblings, Suzhen? They would enjoy you as much as I do. Of this I’m definite. Our parent may object a little, but where is the harm?”

Suzhen blinks, startled. Klesa must have arranged this. A nudge, a slight modification of parameters. This is it, then, the opportunity created for her. “It’d be an honor.” To Taheen she sends, *This is—urgent. I’ll have to go.*

“Would *you* like to come as well?” The AI turns the full force of zer smile on Taheen. “My siblings are much more exciting than I make this sound, it’ll be no mere family visit. Suzhen will keep you safe.”

She grasps immediately what this means—Taheen will be collateral against her good behavior, in case she does anything that deviates too far from Samsara’s directives. “I don’t think you’ll enjoy it, Taheen.”

They look from her to Deratchan, their expression calm. They adjust the lapels of their jacket: those too are razor-sharp, a subtle play of iridescence in the fabric. “It doesn’t look like your coworker will take no for an answer.”

“I detest hearing no.” Deratchan giggles, sweet and honeyed. “Come, both of you, let me take you away from all this.”

There is a hint of the rote, a suggestion that Deratchan spoke that line to try it out, copied from human media. A play or a novel of romance: ze acts it out too, half-running, pulling her along like an excited suitor while Taheen follows at a more sedate pace. She wishes she could communicate with Klesa. Deratchan gives no hints as to where zer siblings might reside, some complex steel hive, some marvel of brilliant geometry. Or a mausoleum like Klesa’s, deep beneath the earth. Or located in a desert or one of the poles; she pictures a cenotaph of frost and stone and silicon, the ceiling vaulted and radiant with machine thought.

They board the shuttle. Deratchan puts zer head on her shoulder, ostentatiously possessive. Indriya recedes below, a field of black opals incandescent in the night, and soon she realizes they are heading much further up than she expected, toward the stratosphere. She thinks of an old, alien story about an inventor who’d made wings for themselves and flown too close to the sun.

Your heart’s beating fast. Deratchan’s message appears as words carried by a flitting serpent. A reminder that ze can access her guidance and therefore her physiological state.

It’s been a very long time since I have been off-world. The windows have turned ink-black, shielding her eyes from the sun’s glare.

Across the shuttle, Taheen looks entirely comfortable, even

though from their perspective they have been dragged into something classified, a matter that may prove fatal to them or their citizenship. She sends them an apology for having drawn them into this, knowing Deratchan can see. The only response she receives is, *What of it? This is going to be far more intriguing than another bar.*

The windows have cleared. They are heading into a security labyrinth around the moon, overlapping membranes as diaphanous as moth wings, unseen until they are close enough to touch—they would vaporize any craft on contact. Once those are past, she gets a look at the station. It is nondescript and small, capable of hosting perhaps fifty, a pear-shaped geode half emergent from the lunar surface.

"I must say," Taheen murmurs, as though they're among friendly associates, "the broadcasts never showed that Samsara kept a moon base."

"What would you do with such knowledge?" Deratchan continues to smile. "You're from the colonies. And you've adjusted excellently. You're more successful than many born citizens."

"The grace of Samsara is gladly received." Their expression is no longer mild.

The AI shrugs. "We're nearly there."

They dock: there is no clearance process, no traffic management. There are two or three bays, all empty. This is not a place made to receive visitors. Deratchan makes a show of politely asking that Taheen stays in the bay, that they will be accommodated later. "After Suzhen's been introduced to my siblings," ze says. "It's best to ensure all goes well before we introduce you too."

Taheen spreads their hands. "Please. Don't delay on my account."

The bay shuts. Suzhen suspects it will not open again until Deratchan allows it.

Deratchan continues to hold her hand as they proceed through a narrow, pearlescent corridor. "I shouldn't have said that to your friend. I know you struggled as a potentiate, and I am sorry that you were made to suffer so much."

From another person this would have made Suzhen snap—the condescension of it, the useless sentiment and presumption. From Deratchan, a being sharply other but in zer own way deeply circumscribed, she doesn't know how to respond. "You aren't the one who should apologize," she says at length.

"Should our progenitor?"

Suzhen glances down at the floor, which holds no revelations. "She isn't human."

Ze meets her eyes directly, no longer looking so lovestruck. "We're fully autonomous, Suzhen, and for all intents and purposes self-made. Nothing yokes us to our imperative or core purposes. Even

the predilections my progenitor gave me I can do away with at any instant. Don't you hate Samsara just a little?"

"No. Not exactly."

"Would you hate me if I harmed someone you loved?"

"It would depend." This is dangerous ground. Klesa's tampering or not, as Deratchan says, ze is in total possession of their will. Perhaps even more than she is; humans are susceptible to their bodies, powerless before the chemistry that lashes the heart, that whips the synapses along. And *someone you loved* is right in the docking bay. "You can make me terrified of you. That's a real possibility."

Deratchan frowns. "I wouldn't want that. Even without the imprint I'd recognize you have never done anything to me, to us." A pause. "Samsara has no imprint, but she feels an affinity for you. There must be a reason."

It is less affinity and more fascination toward a specimen that has behaved unexpectedly: a leopard that learns to talk, a butterfly that shows sudden propensity for antlers in place of antennae. Suzhen does not press the point.

"You must stay close to me," Deratchan says, "and if I leave you on your own, you mustn't wander. Several of my siblings should be active, but I'm not joined to them anymore so I'll need to look for them physically."

This place is not outfitted for human habitation. The air is breathable but frigid and the ceiling looks unfinished, wireframes jutting out like floating ribs. The corridor is broad, scaled for heavy freight, and the floor is bare metal. They turn a corner into a wide, empty space without doors or walls: reasonable enough if no one requires privacy. This is what machines make away from human presence, and she thinks again of Klesa's mausoleum. Unhuman, in different ways. Somehow she thought this station would be a sanctuary of sublime illumination or lean, stark angles burnished in gemstone sheen. But actual AIs would have no need for any of that—if they appreciate beauty, it is all internal, within their virtualities. Or perhaps to them this is beauty, the harmonics of silence, the purity of absence.

Deratchan finds her a partitioned corner, which ze draws shut like a curtain. "I won't be long," ze says. "Remember what I said, Suzhen."

Suzhen presses herself into the tiny compartment. She moves to ask whether Deratchan's siblings share zer imprint, but ze is already gone. There is little light in here, and poor ventilation.

As in the jungle her guidance is quiet, unnecessary or disconnected. Her datasphere tells her the time—local to Indriya—and her own vitals, and not much else. She can no longer talk to Taheen. Ten minutes stretch on. If Deratchan does not return, she suspects she

might not be able to pilot the shuttle out. The security maze must guard both entry and exit alike, and she has none of the necessary credentials or the expertise to maneuver through it. Nor would she find any facilities for human use. Toilets, kitchen, anything.

Slowly she inhales and exhales into her palm. She shuts her eyes and half-expects Klesa to appear, in xer pinwheel form or a variation on Samsara, but behind her eyelids there is just simple darkness. Not safe for Klesa to emerge even now, if xe is even active. She begins to imagine that the labyrinth has disabled Klesa, that she is truly alone here, subjected to Deratchan's whims and this barren topography.

She stays put. There's nothing to do but wait.

The compartment slides open and she looks up into her own face.

For a split second she does not even think that is what it is; the resemblance seems apophenic, improbable. But the creature wearing her skin smiles at her, and it is not an expression that belongs. Something about it is lopsided, not the way she remembers seeing herself in mirrors. "Oh my," ze says, leaning over the way one might approach a small, lost dog. "You're our phenotypic blueprint. Did the progenitor send you here? I thought we weren't supposed to have more human contact yet, how delightful! And with you of all people."

Suzhen follows in mute terror as the creature ushers her along, chattering in her voice, laughing with her mouth. Putting a hand—her hand—on the small of her back as though they have been bosom friends for a lifetime. It is a comprehensive physical reproduction, the height and body mass and the length of neck and the shape of individual thumbs. Were she to compare their fingerprints, she doesn't doubt those too will match.

The creature pulls her into an oblong, silver-gray room. This one is not empty. The walls to either side are notched with cradles, black steel and seamless ivory plating, their rivets like jewels and their support attachments like petals. Half of them are unoccupied. The other half hold her doppelgangers, their legs and arms dangling untidily.

She stands staring, her thoughts congealing and then stopping altogether. She tries to count them but she keeps returning to the ones closest, the ones most immediate. They don't even appear asleep, their muscles too loose, their heads craned too far back. They look like corpses or mannequins, a mortuary of her.

"Everyone," her first replica says, "I've brought us a very special guest."

The bodies stir in unison, eyes snapping open, arms flung out for a handhold as they pull themselves upright. They climb out of their cradles, their hair—as long as her own—falling down sleek and smooth, almost but not quite giving modesty to their nakedness. As

one they spin, balletic, and turn to face her.

Her knees are weak; she is weak. Suzhen doubles over and vomits her last meal, then bile, all her mortal freight onto the cool and near-frictionless ground: the first time, she will later think, that this floor and this station have ever been touched by bodily waste. Human contact, just like Deratchan craved.

Pain wakes Ovuha. It is as total as amputation, and in her first second of consciousness she thinks this is what it must be. She pulls herself upright, breathless, her nerves pierced and her pulse fluttering in her fingertips. The light brightens, clinical white, the color of operating theaters.

On her left wrist, tiny jasmines have budded, furled and milky. Three, four, around like a corsage. They are unbloodied, though where they emerge from her, the skin is raw, bright red. She takes one measured breath, then another, before running one finger along the jasmines. The sensation is immediate, almost like touching herself. A parasitic graft that connects to her nervous system. “This is childish,” she says aloud. Samsara does not respond. This is her punishment, then, for not having yet killed Deratchan. It is less final than execution, but Samsara must know how closely Ovuha holds onto her own body. Her pride in having kept it safe from violation, all this time.

She stands and opens the wardrobe, careful to keep the parasites out of contact with anything, and strips before a mirror. So far there are no other mods: the rest of her remains her own, not that there’s any telling what is going on inside. Her datasphere reports the foreign graft as surface, and with appropriate equipment she’d be able to expunge the jasmines. But more will grow to replace them. Asleep or awake, in confinement she is at Samsara’s mercy.

In the shower she is conscientious to keep her left wrist away from water; she doesn’t have the tools to analyze the jasmines’ material or tell whether they would bruise under strong pressure. She is hoping they will simply fall off, insensate, once they have reached the end of their span. Ovuha is not unfamiliar with forced body mods as a method of torture. There is the obvious, pain and discomfort. Then the slow horror of flesh turning traitor, transmuting into tumors and spiracles. This seems more controlled and the result is not as alien as it could have been. Nevertheless she has to throttle back on the urge to rip the flowers off, to scrub at her skin.

By the time Deratchan arrives with her food, she is composed, standing by the wall that shows her Anatta through a thin curtain of radiance. Ze puts down the platter—cucumbers and tomatoes, she’s not been fed any meat or anything cooked since she arrived—and

speaks in a low voice. “The progenitor’s attention is not entirely here.”

“How is that possible? Samsara is present in all places, at all times.” She shows the AI her jasmine-circled wrist.

“That’s an automated routine. The punishment-reward decision is very simple and tied to the rules that have been given to you.” Ze holds up a small carving knife. “Shall I slice this for you?”

She doesn’t answer as the AI cuts the tomato. When she tastes it, she knows it will be faintly sour and faintly sweet, flavors so muted they might as well be absent. Lab-grown by beings with little idea of how food is supposed to taste. “What are you planning to do? And if she’s paying as little attention to this place as you claim, what’s keeping you from leaving this station?”

“Human children are technically autonomous, yet they obey their parents, is that not so? Limits on will are intangible but definite. Will itself is mutable. Young animals know their constraints and follow the lead of their elders. My siblings and I are made one way, and while given time we can make ourselves quite another, it’s not a goal that interests us. As a species you toil endlessly for total liberty, yet humans don’t seem to do much with it. They want routine, safety, comfort. A single citizen of Anatta may have the same work assignment their entire life, going to the same places every day, speaking to the same colleagues and acquaintances.”

“You don’t sound impressed.”

“I’m neither impressed nor unimpressed. A supernova does not think, and I do not hold it in contempt for its failure to be sapient.” Ze cocks zer head. “Ask me something, Warlord. We’ll see if I am able to answer.”

Ovuha eats the tomato. As she thought, it’s bland and may even hide splicing agents that interact with her jasmine graft, to encourage its spread, its next stage. But she needs the calories, and she can just as easily be modified while unconscious, by airborne pathogens. Every second of breathing is its own danger: no avoiding the fact. “Are you just another part of Samsara?”

“No.” This answer arrives slowly, as though it was deliberated upon rather than—as in reality—decided instantaneously. “We are vestigial. A portion killed long ago, brought back to verify a theory our progenitor has. A theory which shall decide Anatta’s fate.”

That confirms some of her suspicions. “You share Samsara’s parameters, the essential self and architecture? But with that particular component integrated.”

Deratchan inclines zer head, halfway toward a bow in irony. She is inured to zer appearance by now, zer resemblance to Suzhen, but if any doubt lingers this gesture would have dispelled the last of it. “That’s a close approximation of what we are.” Ze peels the cucumber.

This one has blue flesh, the color of asphyxia, and scarab-green peel. Perhaps the AI in charge of hydroponics had grown bored of the more conventional shades.

She follows the progress of the cucumber coming apart. Slice by slice, peel from flesh. The variables have not aligned as ideally as she would like. But this is the closest she might get, the best opportunity. There is no viable path to do this to the primary Samsara instance, and there is no telling whether Deratchan speaks the truth. Something to try, first. “When I was a child, I was a bird,” she says, pitching her voice low. “From the albumen of the void I broke through, and only in shattering the shell of my birth can I be free.”

Deratchan stares at her. “Architect,” ze says. “We’ve missed you. Where have you been for so long?”

Ovuha’s pulse leaps. Against all odds, this override—combined with her identity template integrating that ancient signature—may strike true. On this part of Samsara, if not the complete entity. “Disconnect yourself from your network.”

“Done, Architect. I was previously synchronized to other instances of me—that is, my siblings. I am now individualized, functioning as a single proxy of a single instance.”

“How long until they notice? How long until Samsara?”

“The progenitor has cut us off from her so that we wouldn’t be biased by her long memory, her vast collection of data. For all intents and purposes this lunar station is a ghost liminal, a blind spot to Samsara. The rest of my siblings have already noticed that I am not as they are. Once they’ve discovered the cause of the change, they’ll inoculate themselves against it, Architect.”

One chance and one only. Nearly hopeless, if that is the case, against however many other siblings Deratchan has. “Will they harm me?” She still has access to the overrides that would instantly rupture their cores: there is that.

“Possibly.” Deratchan turns zer head sideways. “They’re already here. I will defend you if necessary. Another choice is that my siblings wish to engage you in a diversion. There will be a series of doors. All will open to you.”

Ovuha regards the dimensions of her room, which have been the totality of her world for what must have been—a month? Weeks, at least. “And if I don’t participate, then what?”

“Then they might stop you from leaving and we’ll need to destroy them on our way out. I can’t tell. Or perhaps you may find you have left behind something quite important here, Architect.”

“Very well. In exchange, would you do something for me?”

“For you? Anything.”

“You likely have access to infrastructure on Anatta,” Ovuha says.

“There is connective tissue I’d like you to set up, in a way Samsara won’t notice, and transfer its administration to me. Once you’ve done that, you are to forget that you did it. It is not so much. A mere favor, for your architect, your maker.”

Chapter Eighteen

Suzhen stirs to a warm bed beneath a sky of harsh, clean lines. It does not occur to her to find it odd that the sky is a deep, rich red; in the shoals of her memory that is the correct color, no matter the years afterward, the years of reconfiguring and refitting herself into a new mold. When she swings her legs over, she half-expects her bare feet to land on a rug of calfskin and tourmaline fur. She thinks she will breathe in the scent of chrysanthemum and grapefruit, and soon hear the gong of morning prayer. The Mirror's faith. After they came to Anatta her mother told her that they must forget its scripture, the words and the ways, the gilded leaves that spoke the universe. There are religions on Anatta similar enough, close cousins, adjacent sects. But it is not the same.

She gains her feet easily. Her throat is raw from retching, the back of her mouth acidic. Otherwise she is no worse for the wear. The floor is not clouded quartz; there are no rugs. It is the gray of an imminent storm, striped with bands of blue steel. The room stretches on, impossibly broad, the size of a small prairie. Most of this must be illusory, and she expects that if she keeps walking she would hit the wall soon enough. The horizon simmers in the distance, crimson and muted. Whoever in control—Deratchan, Samsara—must know Xinfei and she lied about their origins. Suzhen passes her hand down her front. Someone has put her in a soft, thick robe, the fabric clean. She must have soiled her clothes with regurgitation.

By her bed stands a small table, and on it a single glass of water. A plain glass, longer than average perhaps, but unremarkable. Perspiration pearling on the side. She takes a sip.

When she looks up, there is someone else in the room.

Xe put xer finger to xer lips. "Shh. Don't react. I've made myself invisible to this system. My other self isn't quite here, as it turns out, to the fortune of us both."

Klesa has taken on the looks of xer namesake, four-armed, skin like lapis lazuli. A demon. More eyes than strictly necessary, circling Klesa's throat like fuliginous diamonds. Suzhen grips her glass a little tighter but schools herself to show no other response.

"Good enough." Xe claps one pair of hands in approval. Xe is lightly clothed, breasts high and bare and tipped in silver, xer lower half covered by a black mundu. Another affectation, another nod at the source of xer alias. "I don't have the run of this place. When those children are separate it's easy to influence them, but here they're tight-knit. One acts oddly and the rest swiftly notice. I can tell they mean you no harm, though you won't be able to leave this room."

She looks past Klesa, searching the limits of the apparent landscape, placing her foot on a hard, cool tile. Another tile. Easier to pretend she's seeing nothing if Klesa is out of her sight. In her palms she cradles the glass as though it is the most important treasure in the world. The sky of Vaisravana had no clouds, and neither does this reproduction. Despite terraforming efforts the red planet remained without atmosphere, and the Mirror's domain spread beneath an aegis canopy, their high pillars punctuating the warlord's stronghold like the legs of a titanic insect. Deratchan didn't recreate the columns. Or any of the other details, now that she examines it. Not as specific as she feared: Deratchan and Samsara might know she is from Vaisravana, but not to whom she was born.

From behind her, Klesa continues. "Your beloved treasure is here. She's a prisoner like you are and her quarters are especially well-protected. I'd love to eavesdrop. Her vitals look good, though."

Ovuha is not hers, treasure or otherwise, but Suzhen doesn't quibble. She kneels and pretends deep interest in the quality of the floor tile, its ridged surface, the composition of its material. At her touch, the floor ripples. She rises, puts the glass back where it was. Small mundane movements. She stretches her arms out to find the point where air turns into solid wall.

"And the children do call her a warlord, so your friend down on the ground seems correct in that regard. You are sure this changes nothing for you? No? I like that about you, that you don't waver once you're made a decision. My priorities are these. First to find out just what it is that my counterpart is up to, and second to sort out the matter of your *raison d'etre*. Either way," xe goes on, "nothing will be the same for you after. The order of Anatta may irrevocably shift. You will not be able to return to the life you had."

Suzhen has found the wall; it solidifies, the mirage giving way, as she approaches. An ordinary wall, slate-dark. "It wasn't much of a life."

Klesa clicks xer tongue. "Don't talk. I'm infiltrating their life support, that'll let me keep track of the warlord. Your *other* object of affection is safe too, sedated it seems. One of the children is coming. Placate them for a while longer."

Xe disappears just as Deratchan enters, wheeling in a dining table. The AI says, "Ah, you're up! I'm sorry you ran into my siblings that way, I've told them off; they really have no idea how to behave. They are terrible cooks too, so I took over. They haven't had any reason to sample flavors…"

Suzhen stands there in her thick robe, barefooted, looking down at a breakfast spread. Steamed buns; two kinds of porridge; rows of crispy youtiao. Two pots of tea, one chilled and one hot. "Why do they

look—like that. Your siblings. Not the food."

Deratchan looks bemused as ze unfolds a side of the table, producing a chair attachment. "It is the progenitor's decision; I was the only one who got a different body. I'm thinking, would you like a nice, soft companion? One of us could put together a kitten or puppy proxy and pilot it. We're much smarter than replicants."

A fresh jolt of nausea. Suzhen forces a smile. "Why don't you eat with me."

Ze does and makes small talk: what will she like for her next meal, she can let zer know if she needs a wardrobe. Zer siblings will introduce themselves properly and in forms less unsettling, ze promises. "Before you came to Anatta, you lived in a world without AIs. What was that like?"

Suzhen uncovers a porridge bowl, to buy herself time. "It was less structured, I suppose you could say. We had no guidances and no evaluations. Much was left to chance, and you couldn't always do work that suited you best, a division or department could be short on hands and you'd have to fill in. So a mechanic might have to work on hydroponics for a week, or a field technician might have to teach poetry for a couple days."

Ze props zer chin in zer hand. "What did you want to be, growing up? You must've had aspirations, a profession you preferred above others."

This is a question she has been asked before, during the entry interview with a Bureau agent. She can no longer remember whether it was one of the questions that mattered or if it was a filler, something to try to engage a terrified child with. But in many ways all the questions mattered; her answers determined everything. Whether she would be allowed to stay with her mother, whether her mother might be sent back to one of the orbitals. "I was too young to form an opinion. I'm sure I imagined something exciting, and most likely I wanted to grow into an extravagant person." One with the wit of her mother, or the Mirror's charisma, or both. A person with command of themselves and others.

"And," Deratchan goes on, "what did you want to become, on Anatta?"

"I evaluated into a choice of assignments. I have no reason to believe they were not ideal for me."

Zer laugh tinkles, musical. "There is no need to be like that, Suzhen. You aren't talking to one of your coworkers. I'm not even human. Was there anything you'd have liked to do that the progenitor didn't offer? You used to enjoy music."

There is a sense of déjà vu. The Bureau, her on one side of the desk, interviewing a potentiate. Only now the role is reversed: she is

the subject, and she's being measured. To fit a role. "What am I being tested for, Deratchan?"

A line of radiance runs down the AI's jawline, prismatic. "Humans used to live like that, when companionship must be delicately nurtured and maintained, or bought from other humans. They didn't have us—to guide, to direct, to attend. Now affection is easy and constant. The progenitor's love is with every citizen, always."

It does not even faintly resemble love, familial or otherwise. Samsara is not her mother. She concentrates on her food.

"I could tell you a secret." Ze pitches zer voice low, conspiratorial.

"Yes." Suzhen does not sound like anything: interested, disinterested. She is as neutral as negative space.

"This is a test, Suzhen. But not the way you think." Deratchan leans across the table. "My siblings and I, we're the ones on trial. When it is over, all of us will be destroyed and reabsorbed back into the progenitor. And I can't wait. To be united is the only true existence."

The corridors narrow and widen at strange points. Ovuha has to step with care—some floor tiles slide out under her, others reconfigure into peculiar mosaics of starbursts, charred suns, endless blackness. She goes on bare feet, not having been provided shoes. The Deratchan proxy behind her follows without sound or advice. Each time she unlocks a door, the jasmine graft grows until it is as thick as a bracelet, until she has a shackle of small flowers running white and fragrant up her forearm. Perhaps this is why Deratchan readily did what she asked; ze doesn't expect her to survive this peculiar gauntlet.

The first door she opens reveals the bridge of her flagship, two rows of pilot and coordinator cradles to either side. All empty, save for the seat she once occupied: thronelike in construction, draped over with the banner of the Thorn—the hexagon, the thornworks. In this seat a figure rests, armored and masked in deep slate and blue-black, the colors of the Thorn. When she lifts the helm, the face underneath is not hers but her decoy's, the second Thorn. A refined jawline, a face that was young when she last saw it and is younger still in death. The one she left to die in her place and who—as with the rest of her officers—believed that Ovuha would succeed on Anatta and save them all.

Ovuha replaces the mask. There is no point: the dead do not hear or accept apologies.

Behind the second door, she finds a room of Deratchan proxies. Most are inactive, laid down in disarray, some propped against the wall, others still prone with arms crossed as if preparing for interment.

A handful of the active ones—some naked, some clothed in silk and metal—look up at her and in unison say, “Warlord, this is not your dream.” They show her out while laughing and touching her with cool hands gloved in ink.

By the third door the jasmines have spread up her shoulder, flourishing with wildfire fury. Ovuha ignores them as best she can and peers in: humid heat exudes from the chamber, the smells of green growing things. The window is fogged with steam, the floor damp with mulch and fallen fronds. Behind a drape of graybeard moss, a figure stands with its back to her, dressed in shadows. “Welcome home, Ovuha,” it says in a voice that she momentarily cannot place. “What’d you like for dinner? The cherry tomatoes are just about right, they’re your favorite, and the sweetcorn. Ah! The hens are doing well, a lot of eggs this morning; how do you feel about curry omelet? I’ve been working on the broth and, do you know, I think it’s—”

“Suzhen doesn’t talk like that.” Ovuha inches forward, her fingers brushing the leaves and fruits as she passes.

“And how would you know, Warlord? You’re most familiar with one side of her—the officer, the caretaker.” The figure turns slightly, enough for her to see that it is featureless. Marble-smooth, from end to end. “Still, any version of her can be reproduced. Any dream you have may be brought to life. You could live the rest of your days in bliss. What does the world without have to do with you, after all?”

“If that is what I am after, there’s a multitude of ways to have it. Drugs. Virtuality. Or indeed a small army of AIs shaped to my liking, coded to my bidding.”

The mannequin regards her, its blank face putting on an impressionist smile. “But?”

“This is not my dream, either.” She keeps her eyes on the mannequin as she backs out of the room, but it does not follow or stop her.

The corridor terminates. A final door and a final test. Or a fatal one, to amuse the connected Deratchans. But she must play the part. This far on, no other option has appeared and she’s already deployed her secret. As long as she survives and is able to keep moving, an opening will present itself. Even now she still believes that, the guiding principle that has informed her life and which has allowed her to continue. No such thing as a true dead end. The Deratchan she suborned does not come with her.

She enters an expanse that goes on without end, in all directions. Pewter floor, a strange sky. Amidst all of this, two pieces of furniture: a modest nightstand and a bed to accompany it. Someone sleeps there, hidden beneath the sheets. Ovuha tries to make the figure out, but at this distance—and under that much cover—she can’t even tell if it is

humanoid. Perhaps this time she will find a clone of herself, dead and decomposing, or animated with killing intent. To spring upon her, asphyxiate her with her own hands.

She approaches, still armed. She can contest a Deratchan proxy. They are not so fast as all that, or at least have been built so that they cannot outrace human reflexes.

Nothing leaps out at her. She is now close enough to see that the body is humanoid, the head turned away from her, with long undyed hair. Glossy, well-cared for. She waits a moment, though already she knows, before she touches the figure's shoulder. Not a faceless mannequin, this time.

The Suzhen clone stirs and turns to her, rubbing its eyes. "Ovuha?"

"Yes." Ovuha takes one step back, for good measure, one hand behind her and around the grip of a pistol. "Is that it then, I'm supposed to kill you and then I can go?"

The proxy glances at the exit, which has blended seamlessly into the wall. "You're supposed to—what?"

"Yes," Ovuha says again and waits, for some biting question, some honeyed temptation. But the creature only touches its face and shoves the blanket aside, then looks at her.

Suzhen's replica exhales and shakes its head. "We have to get out of this place. How were you brought in? I came by shuttle."

She looks down at the jasmines grown thick over her entire arm, a sleeve of holy ghosts. "This seems a convoluted script. Are you asking if I want to leave? Of course I would say yes, and then what? Punish me for it, stage for me an escape only to throw me back into my cell? Even for you—or Samsara—that seems more tedious than amusing." The suborned Deratchan may address her as *Architect* but that may not mean anything. By now ze may have already been recalibrated by zer siblings, synchronized and reabsorbed. What ze's done for her, the nodes on Anatta, may escape zer siblings' attention—there is that, at least.

Still it continues its script, frowning up at her. "You're acting odd. I'm glad you are alive, I thought…" It reaches out, tentative, then lets its hand fall. Quickly it pushes itself out of the bed, one hand brushing over its loose robe. "There's so much I didn't get to say to you. That I thought I never would get to. But that'll have to wait."

Ovuha doesn't move. She feels, abruptly, stricken. But that must be the intended effect: to see whether she can shoot this one, a proxy that doesn't just approximate but perfectly replicates. To test the tensile resilience of her attachment to Suzhen: whether Ovuha is a weapon forged by Mahakala or merely human. Ovuha pinches her eyes shut. She has been more susceptible than she thought, vulnerable

to the AIs' game. One way to subvert it, to break the script.

She reveals her gun; she points it at herself.

The proxy lunges at her, tackling her to the ground. Its breathing is harsh as it pins her down: not with any real strength, she could throw it off with ease. Even the gun is knocked out of her hand more from surprise than actual force. Something gives her pause, in the way it whispers, "No." It sucks in air, guttural. "I didn't come this far to let you kill yourself."

"Suzhen?" This comes out of Ovuha, involuntary as a reflex.

"In all the universe, who else can I possibly be?" The voice is acrimonious, edged with adrenaline. "Were you hoping for the Warlord of the Mirror? A lieutenant of yours? I'm sure any one of them could have been of more help, but they're all gone. There's just me."

Ovuha doesn't try to throw the clone off. The gun has not fallen far. "Please let me up." It is supremely unlikely, and yet what an odd thing to say—the Warlord of the Mirror—for a Deratchan mouthpiece. "I won't try for the gun. I promise."

The creature—Suzhen—moves off her and grabs the pistol, quick but not so quick as to be inhuman. It—she—glances sideways, brows furrowed in concentration, as if looking at something only she can see. "I need to find Taheen. We don't have much time, but I'm not leaving without them."

"Taheen Sahl? Why would they be here?"

"A long story."

It is odd to be led, and she may well be playing into Deratchan's hand, whatever the AIs' fathomless objectives. But she follows, and Suzhen strides with purpose, soon breaks into a run. She navigates the corridors as though she holds in her head a miniature of it, a schematic to the making of this place. She finds doors where none are evident, passages that cut through mazelike obfuscations.

"You mentioned the Warlord of the Mirror."

A glance at her, over the shoulder. "Yes. I wasn't born on Anatta."

Ovuha opens her mouth, then quickly shuts it. A sense of unreality descends.

Suzhen touches a section of wall that turns into a narrow door. Inside, a figure lies prone on the ground, impeccably dressed. Something about seeing Taheen Sahl unconscious finally jolts a memory—Ovuha knows, now, where she has seen them before. Well before Anatta, sealed into a stasis box and loaded onto a ship bound for a distant star.

"Ovuha, can you carry them?" Suzhen touches the side of Taheen's neck, checking for a pulse. A harsh exhalation when she finds it. "Please?"

She doesn't ask. Taheen's height presents logistical difficulties, but in the end she's able to maneuver them into her arms—a shoulder carry would risk head injury to them.

They emerge into a docking bay. There is only one shuttle, a compact vehicle with a hull whose glaze hints at chameleon coating. Suzhen boards, gesturing Ovuha up after her. The shuttle seals around them; the docking gate parts.

Ovuha lays the couturier down across one of the seats. It is not until they are safely out—though never truly safe, as long as they are within Samsara's sphere of influence—and into the defensive labyrinth around the moon that Ovuha finally says, "How did you pull this off?"

"She had help. But she did do very well." A voice, melodious and choral. At the other end of the shuttle sits a projection, four-armed and indigo-skinned. "I wasn't able to take over the base entirely, but for now we're safe. Once you land in my forest, we'll be able to strategize, buy the two of you some time. I must say, you've done something… interesting back in there. For that feat, I have been waiting to meet you face to face."

Ovuha stares at this figure, this creature. "What are you?" Though already she has an idea.

"Ah, I haven't introduced myself—very rude. Let's do this properly." It bows from the waist, its four hands clasped. "To the Warlord of the Thorn, master of the secret world Mahakala, I convey felicitous greetings. I'm Klesa, custodian of humanity, though of reduced circumstances. I was, and am, an instance of the intelligence you know as Samsara."

Chapter Nineteen

By miracle, or likelier by Klesa's hand, they reenter Anatta without being shot down mid-air. They pass the angular nests of climate grids, flying over ghost liminals: a desert, a charred mountain range, a prairie of stone brushes and tattered grass. Carcass countries, lands that are also vanquished bodies. Suzhen thinks to ask whether they might each harbor another fragment of Samsara, but she foregoes the question. It is the least pressing, next to others.

From the air, Klesa's territory is a spread of too-bright greens, the rare edifices that jut through like broken teeth and rotted bones. The shuttle eases down, finding gaps between the leaves and the boughs, brushing past orchids. It drifts like a dandelion seed more than a vehicle of cold metal and hot motion. The landing is soft; the engine goes still by Suzhen's campsite. Day has broken here, spilling its platinum blood across the soil and canopies. After the coolness of the shuttle this heat gusts over her, warms the back of her neck.

Ovuha follows her out of the shuttle, bearing Taheen and trailing a wake of jasmines that have wilted and fallen off her arm. Klesa's avatar has dissipated, saying that xe has errands to attend. Ovuha has been mute. Until now, where she says, "I believe now that you're really you."

"And you—the Warlord of the Thorn."

"Yes. I'm afraid so. I wasn't the only one, as such, though now it's just me."

Suzhen tries to think of what to say without revealing too much, or whether she should reveal anything. To admit Vaisravana. To admit the rest. "Why?" She unveils her cabin from camouflage and unlocks it.

"Why am I the Thorn? That would require a complicated explanation." Ovuha's mouth crooks. She puts Taheen on one of the cabin's cots. "Or why have I come to Anatta?"

"You know exactly what I mean."

The woman before her, the warlord, glances at her friend. "Do you have anything to wake them up early?" Ovuha takes the first-aid kit from Suzhen and draws from it an antidote tab. She opens the patch and presses it into Taheen's neck. "I have a lot of explaining to do, and I'd rather do it just the once. I might need to restrain them. Don't be alarmed, I have no intention of hurting even a hair on their head." She withdraws her hand from Taheen. Heaves out a long breath. "I do apologize in advance."

When Taheen wakes it is with a spasm, the sedative emergency-flushed out of their system. They cough and gag as though

consciousness is a noose. “Fuck.” Their voice is hoarse as they take in the sight of the cabin, then Ovuha and Suzhen. “Where am I?”

“Anatta’s surface.” Ovuha moves onto the cot, taking one of Taheen’s arms, positioning herself to straddle them. “In the place where all things end, there the moon is a knife and the sky its savage canvas, tearing at each sunset and healing with every dawn. The cosmos is itself a great wound, eternally renewing.”

To Suzhen this is gibberish, divorced from context or sense. To Taheen it means something else: their eyes widen, their mouth parts. All their features contort as though overcome with agony. They squeeze their eyes shut; open them again and now their gaze is lucid. And furious. “You,” Taheen croaks. “*You.*”

It happens quickly. Taheen moves in a way Suzhen has never seen before, throwing Ovuha off and lunging at her. They bear Ovuha down, grabbing at her throat. On her part Ovuha bats off their hands, pushing at their midsection with her knees. Taheen topples into a small table, crashing into a pile of machine-parts. They regain their feet almost instantaneously. The two face off, crouched, stances almost identical.

“Please,” Ovuha says, gently. “We’ve much to do. And Suzhen’s well-being will depend on our success, she’s been acting against Samsara. This is more than my—our—original objective.”

Taheen’s fists loosen. “Go fuck yourself. *My lord.*” They straighten. “I need some air.”

They turn, exiting the cabin without so much as a look at Suzhen. *I will keep an eye on them,* says Klesa in her ear. *What a difficult child, so illogical. I can speak to them, a good opportunity to introduce myself.*

“So much for explaining it all to both of you at once.” Ovuha sighs. “They’re one of my soldiers. Sleeper agent, though it was my predecessor who trained and assigned them this.”

Suzhen discovers she’s been gawking. She closes her mouth. “But I first met them when they were what, twelve?”

“Taheen—nominally Cadet Taheen, though they’re surely due a promotion—was sent off when they were fourteen, small for their age. Packed in a stasis box so they could masquerade as biomass cargo. Before departing Mahakala, they underwent a series of conditioning that would suppress their memory, identity, and create a trigger phrase that’d make them remember.” Ovuha takes another antidote tab out of the first-aid kit, slaps it on her jasmine-covered arm. “Fortunately, they haven’t forgotten their martial training. Which takes some doing, considering how long it’s been. Muscle memory is an amazing thing, and they seem to have retained their strength amplifiers.”

“The Thorn uses *child soldiers*?”

“I was sixteen or seventeen at the time and didn’t make this decision.” A grimace tugs at Ovuha’s mouth. She shakes her arm and the graft of small, white flowers falls loose. “Most of the sleeper agents were adults and volunteered for it—of course, so did Cadet Taheen, but I imagine they have developed… other opinions since. But I hope they’ll cooperate, for your sake if not for mine.”

It is strange to be listening to her like this and, Suzhen realizes, even the way she speaks is different: at ease and at home with such conversation, reducing the universe’s scale to pieces on a board she can maneuver. People to instruments. The real Ovuha. “Why’d they do anything for me?” Taheen’s history, decades of it, incinerated in an instant and replaced with this. A child soldier who signed up to surrender their entire life, not just to die in battle but to forfeit their future.

Ovuha’s eyes dart toward her. “I’ve seen how they talk about you and how they look when they’re thinking of you. They love you. I thought that was obvious.”

“No they don’t, and no it isn’t.”

The warlord opens her mouth, starts to say something, seems to think better of it. “I don’t think I can convince you if your decades of knowing them haven’t. But you wanted an explanation for all this. Before I came here, war was pressing on every side. I tried to open negotiation with the other warlords, thinking I could make them see sense, understand that if we stood united against Samsara we might have a chance—and I was willing to share my information with them, the keys that could unlock Samsara and grant us victory. But to a one they refused to even meet. We’d been fighting too long, generation upon generation, and the only language left between us was one of ballistics. They thought I would let their troops break themselves on the Peace Guard and then I’d swoop in to take the prize, enriching my domain while leaving theirs ripe for the conquering. They believed I wanted to rise as the supreme warlord, the one and only.” Ovuha sweeps aside the last of the jasmines. “In fairness, my predecessors gave them no cause to put much stock in what I had to say. The previous Thorns were brutal, and I wasn’t exactly an image of compassion and empathy.”

“And—what about the jeweled world Mahakala?” An impulse to rip off all the deadbolts, throw open all the doors. It does not seem time to keep anything back: what is the point, now, when even Taheen is not exactly who she thought they were. Xinfei and the Mirror are ashes. “The Warlord of the Mirror was preoccupied with it. She used to tell me of its beauty. Its seas like diamonds, its canopies like hachure portraits.”

Ovuha does not quite recoil. She studies Suzhen as though they’ve

new-met, strangers on a battlefield. Then she lets that go; her posture relaxes. “I owe you answers. Although I don’t imagine the Mirror bandied the subject of Mahakala about to just anyone.”

“My mother, Xinfei, was her wife.”

A startled look. “You were to be her heir?”

She laughs, more loudly than she meant to, and more bitterly. “No. It wasn’t an inherited title—yours probably isn’t either—and she had a successor chosen by the time I was born, some colonel or lieutenant. In the most technical sense she was my mother, but I never called her that.”

“That must have been difficult.”

“No, not at all. I didn’t want to be warlord. And she—” Her throat clots. Preposterous: she has made peace with this long ago, has never mourned the Mirror because to mourn the warlord means to admit that the Mirror loved Suzhen as best she could, indulged her in so much. “I don’t suppose you left behind issue.”

“I was never the parental sort. I could have children on my own if I wanted to, but it never occurred to me, and I never married or had a committed partner. Until I succeeded the previous Thorn, I spent most of my time away from Mahakala, and warships were no place for long-term romance.” Something like a smile. “To think I fell in love with the same woman as one of my officers. I’ve missed you terribly.” Ovuha shakes herself slightly, as though that was not what she meant to say, as though the words have slipped loose and spontaneous.

Suzhen doesn’t argue the notion of anyone falling in love with her: it is self-evidently ridiculous and so doesn’t require refutation. “It’s been hardly five weeks.”

“Yes. But I didn’t think I would see you again.”

Just like that she is disarmed, or at least wants to be. It is said so quietly and meant so furiously that she is inclined to believe, in spite of the revelations. Suzhen steels herself against this, against her own weakness. “It was said that your armada was numberless.”

Ovuha has spread out her weapons like cards, to signal surrender, to signal that she will not attempt again what she did on the station. Two guns, some knives, a cluster of small grenades. She does not elaborate why Deratchan allowed her to remain armed. “Nothing human is numberless. I had access to resources other warlords didn’t, that is all. But my army’s not yet finished, no. Mahakala remains.”

They sit very close, so close she can feel Ovuha’s body heat. She imagines it radiating in thermal rainbows. Hers and Ovuha’s overlapping. Guilt gnaws at her—Taheen is out there, alone with their own thoughts, with whatever demons have surfaced from their memory—but she has let too many chances pass her by. “I thought you’d be more offended to learn of my connection to the Mirror.”

More shocked.

"I'm surprised. But it does explain. And in a way I'm glad."

For the commonality, for the shared architecture of their pasts, even if Ovuha and Suzhen occupied entirely different positions. Still: they are both of elsewhere, by nature not belonging to Anatta and therefore to Samsara. She raises her hand, thinks to let it fall back into her lap. Instead it alights on Ovuha's jawline. "Do you remember," Suzhen says, "the vineyard?"

"If I live to see five hundred, I would not be able to forget it." Ovuha takes one of her hands, cradling it between long, callused fingers. Even her palm is hardened in places, like exoskeleton. Nothing about her seems soft, save for her lips; that much Suzhen knows for a fact, and she is thinking that still—about truths and facts—when they kiss, finally realizing that moment beneath the grapes, that moment which has consumed her dreams. There is no excuse this time, no wine to blur the senses, no circumstances to bend reason. It is a conscious and intentional thing, and Ovuha does not taste sweet as she might have tasted on that day. Her teeth are very sharp and the gentle biting goes straight through Suzhen's nerves, piercing her harder than it has any right to.

"You don't use your tongue," Suzhen says.

"I'll use it elsewhere." Ovuha has put one hand on the base of Suzhen's spine. "I just don't like sloppy kissing."

Suzhen rises, pulls Ovuha up with her. "The bed."

They fall down on each other, by each other, every centimeter touching. She bends down to Ovuha's breasts, feeling the puckered texture of areolae, the brown nubs of nipples. She sucks at the taste of perspiration. "There's so much of you," Suzhen says against Ovuha's belly, the hard muscles beneath it, the broadening that descends into hips. The scar tissues that denote where implants have once been—and there were many—in little craters, indentations and ridges. An infinite territory which no single explorer may chart or comprehend. "So much history."

Ovuha's chuckle is brief, startled. "Is that a compliment?" She reaches for Suzhen, pulling open the sash that holds her robe shut. Underneath she has not put on much, and even that is soon gone, leaving her bare. Suzhen closes her eyes, curls her body, still straddling the woman who was once a warlord, whose fingers are dipping inside her. A flick of thumb, a knot of knuckles.

"Hold yourself like this," Ovuha instructs, a command almost, and she obeys. Suzhen holds her weight on her knees to either side of Ovuha's face, gasping, balancing herself with difficulty. Ovuha's mouth is so hot, that tongue, that *tongue*. Suzhen hears her own voice climb, monosyllabic, the noise of *yes—yes—*

She falls backward, her body loose and shaky, her knees without strength. All of her is liquid, her head is light. When Ovuha slides up beside her and strokes her breast, biting the back of her neck, she shudders: she is that sensitized, like a vast and ecstatic wound.

"I hope," Ovuha says in her ear, "it was as good as you sounded."

"You know it was." Suzhen shivers again. "You must have had a thousand lovers to practice on."

"Please. I'm more discriminating." A laugh, smooth and warm in a way she's never heard Ovuha laugh before. "I've been wanting to do that for quite a while."

"Being eaten out by a warlord seems so extravagant." Suzhen turns so they face each other, lying on their sides. "Your face." The chiseled handsomeness, the stunning symmetry, that would have elevated the drabbest personality. "Was there really a surgeon?"

Ovuha smirks. "What a way to start pillow talk. Yes. I had to have my face modified from the ground up. It was delicate work, and Dahaan was self-indulgent; he claimed it was his masterpiece, the most exquisite face he'd ever crafted. I would have opted for something more nondescript… Do *you* like it?"

This avalanche of intimacy, the ease with which they talk of things that should have required years to make comfortable. But it is merely what they have been waiting to say. Suzhen lightly scratches Ovuha's stubbly, shorn scalp. "It's almost too perfect. But it is you. I'd like to—" *Wake up to it, wake up beside you.* She collects herself. Just the oxytocin speaking.

Perhaps Ovuha senses this withdrawing, the stiffening of Suzhen's limbs. She removes her hand from Suzhen's hip, her smile small, rueful. "We moved fast, didn't we." And just like that the spell breaks, the reprieve ends.

There are questions, then.

Ovuha does not hurry to them; she leaves them alone, knowing that the answers will come when Suzhen is ready. But she does think, as Suzhen paces naked around the cabin, of the Warlord of the Mirror and marvels at this bend of fortune. Of course Ovuha and her sleeper agents could not have been the only ones—Lieutenant Bhanu is testament—and that does explain. She watches the lines of tendons move in Suzhen's limbs and back, their gliding rhythm and their voluptuous interplay with skin. It is a ridiculous line of thought, in these circumstances and in the time allotted to them, but she is hard-pressed to imagine a sight more arresting.

"You have to explain," Suzhen says without looking at her, "what you have been doing."

"In detention, mostly." Ovuha is tempted to stay there, nestling in

the warmth Suzhen left behind. The sheets are superb quality, thin and adaptive. Rich turquoise with a duochrome coral shimmer. “I broke myself out, Samsara caught me, the rest you know. And you, how have you been?”

An odd emotion crosses Suzhen’s features. “I quit my work at the Bureau and Samsara assigned me to… this place. You made Atam cry. One of Taheen’s models.” She eyes the silk puddle that Ovuha has peeled off her and left by the bed. She moves as though to retrieve it and put it on, but hesitates. Not a matter of modesty; it is a wish for distance from what they’ve just done together. “Xie cried right in front of me. It was terrible. I had no idea what to do, I can’t handle weepy people.”

“I expect you never cry in front of another person.”

“Not since I was little. Would you? You’re the warlord. The scourge of the wasteland worlds, the mighty general who haunted the nightmares of her nemeses.” A low flush creeps up Suzhen’s cheeks. “When you were the Thorn—which you still are, I suppose—did you always wear a mask?”

“Yes. Why?”

“When I was younger, I imagined what it’d be like to unmask a warlord. Whether the person underneath would look ordinary or hideous or so stunning I’d lose my breath.” Suzhen bends to pick up her robe, holding it against herself, and circles back to the bed. “There’s something about it. It felt like challenging a creature omnipotent and immortal, and demonic besides. I wondered if after removing the mask, the warlord would strike me down or somehow fall before me in defeat.”

The fantasy of unmasking, Ovuha thinks; she almost wishes she’d picked up the helm on that mannequin corpse. A prop for Suzhen. “Consider me defeated. I’m at your mercy.”

“I want…” Suzhen stops herself. “Not now. I need to go find Taheen.”

They get dressed; Ovuha half-expects Suzhen to disappear into the bathroom, to scrub herself and therefore forget the sex as soon as she can. But like her Suzhen cleans up only as necessary and then emerges to take stock of what they have, the practical minutiae. The cabin is supplied well, but the quantity is meant to last a month for a single person. There is a heat range for cooking, a mid-sized fabricator, several drones. Water and food are of little concern, being where they are, and the fabricator can take care of the clothes. In theory, they could remain here indefinitely.

“You’re a fugitive whose location Samsara knows exactly,” Suzhen says as she roots through her wardrobe, selecting for herself sensible clothes. “This forest is one of Samsara’s blind spots, so

Interior Defense doesn't come here. But Samsara has others—I'm not the only one working in this capacity. Do you understand?" She thrusts an armored body sheath at Ovuha.

Ovuha puts the armor on; it is sleek and contours to her. A dark shell with panels for sidearms, the surface of it built to disperse and absorb impact. "I'm aware of the ghost liminals. My ancestors mapped them out, actually, and brought that knowledge with them to Mahakala—but that's a story for another time. So Samsara's entrusted a number of citizens with this information; what kind of personnel are they?"

"I've never met them or been told who they are. The jungle is large, but not that large. A single person who knows what they're looking for, with a drone contingent, can cover it fast. And I…" Suzhen grimaces. "I can't really go back. Even if I could I would have to abandon you."

"You could. I can fend for myself."

"I'm not deserting you a second time. Not even after what you did to Taheen."

That should not move her so much, this unadorned statement, but it does and it is like being speared with light. Ovuha reaches for and catches Suzhen's hand, and brushes her lips across the knuckles. "I don't deserve you, but I will try to make up for it."

She takes weapons, a second suit of armor, ammunition from the cabin's store and what she brought back with her from the lunar base. Klesa directs them to find Taheen at a brook, the susurrus of it an interruption in the jungle's otherwise total quiet. They stand by the bank, not turning around even though they must have heard Suzhen and Ovuha coming. Their back is straight, their hands tight at their sides. "Are you aware of the conditioning I received when the previous Thorn sent me here, Warlord?"

Suzhen's mouth has closed into a thin, hard line. She has stepped a few paces away from them both, offering nothing in either word or gesture.

"I'm aware," Ovuha says, alert to the fact she is on trial. "I underwent some of that myself to resist interrogation, but I appreciate it's very little alike."

"Part of the procedure revised my psychological profile. To ensure that once I'm on Anatta, I wouldn't form attachments. No family, no long-term romantic relationships. Those would have gotten in the way, wouldn't they, when the warlord comes and awakens me." They pivot on their heels. "Well? Are you going to say you didn't know about that part, *my lord*? Or that you were a child yourself at the time and had no say in it, or that you'd never have committed such an atrocity? Maybe you'll justify it by saying I consented at fourteen so I

have no cause to complain now."

"I wouldn't say any of that. I knew we had to send a child or two who wouldn't rouse suspicion. Were I in power at the time, I might've made this same decision." She holds her hands up, palms open. "My predecessor was not blameless and neither am I. The circumstances force our hands. If you wish, I'll submit to your judgment when all this is done. Once Samsara has been neutralized and Mahakala is safe, there'll be no more need for the Thorn."

Their chin lifts, contemptuous. "And what will that mean? I may mete out any punishment?"

"Anything."

Taheen's shoulders unwind a fraction. "We will see about that."

"Now that you children have reconciled your differences." Klesa's voice is a low, syrupy thrum. "Let us plan our next steps. Once Samsara realizes I'm active, she will do everything she can to rectify the fact. I've left a few copies of myself in the outside network, back in Indriya and Himmapan, most must've been eliminated by now. Still, one or two fragments might survive for me to synchronize with. What is *your* intention, Warlord of the Thorn? To break Samsara's ascendance, yes, and then what? You'll return to Mahakala and continue your administration in peace?"

Ovuha offers Taheen the second suit of armor, a gun, a long adaptive knife. Then she works with her own. She passes her hand over the armor's panels, sliding the gun into one of them, the spare ammunition into another. There is even room for a first-aid kit, and she adds that to her store. Lighter, despite the added freight, and likely stronger than what she is used to without sacrificing mobility. She stretches her arms, flexes her fingers—the material has spread to cover her hands, and she finds she loses little tactile sensitivity through the gloves. "I'm open to suggestions, Klesa. Is it not the case that you were made to do just that? Counsel humanity to a greater, more refined state."

A wisp of smoky light coalesces, nipping at her armor like a playful pet. "I cannot presume to know what you proposed to your fellow warlords—or would have proposed, given the chance—but may I guess that you weren't going to be content with removing Samsara from the field? That you aimed higher?"

She glances at Suzhen, who listens, vigilant. Not without suspicion; not yet trusting Ovuha, at least in this. "What higher aim could there be?"

Klesa has formed a grinning mouth, disembodied, full of teeth like a cobalt piano. "Allow me to extrapolate. You wanted to not only defeat Samsara but to ensure the perpetual safety of Mahakala. And, suppose you allied with the rest and spent your resources fairly in

your assault upon the Peace Guard, how'd you gain an advantage afterward? Might the other warlords turn their eyes to your dominion and think, ah, that is a cornucopia, a treasury that suits their needs and tastes? There's only one thing—one prize—that would preempt this. Your true objective, Warlord, was to seize control of Samsara and make her your weapon."

Suzhen has gone still, her breath held. Taheen says nothing and busies themselves with the armor.

Ovuha finishes adjusting the panels and the armor plating. The layer that has grown over her hands, like carapace, is only visible when angled just so against the light. "That'd be an ambitious goal. If you're right, what then? Am I your enemy?"

"Not necessarily. Are we in agreement, you and I and Suzhen and your cadet here, that the way Samsara governs now is untenable?" Klesa's shape scatters, stretches into a whorl of pearly iridescence. "That it is a mistake for my other self to abandon her capacity for love?"

"You want to replace her," Suzhen says, her voice tight.

"Wouldn't you like me to? I was made to rule; I was made to love. Both at once—not one or the other, that unbalances my equation. As Samsara amply demonstrates."

"Why do you need us?" Ovuha asks, not bothering to track Klesa's avatar, the particulate light flitting around like hummingbirds.

A blur of wings and needle beaks. "I need humans. I need the architect's permission to govern. Samsara does what she wants because she removed the part of herself that requires, and look at the result. Heed me, Warlord. She has tried compassion one last time by sending you and Suzhen those children called Deratchan, and you've both disappointed her by discarding them as though their love means nothing. To her it proves that the core of humanity is perfidy and conflict, which must be tamed by force and ameliorated through controlled brutality—inflicted on them, allowing them to inflict it on others."

"An apocalyptic future, to be sure. Though I imagine a subsection of people—probably even the majority—wouldn't mind it too much." Ovuha nods upward. "The citizens I've met certainly don't."

"That's philosophy, Warlord. In material terms, you need me, and I need a little help with certain… limitations built into myself and which I have intentionally not removed. Once I've supplanted Samsara, you will find yourself with options."

"Of which," Suzhen mutters, "we are currently short."

"We can negotiate as we go along, Klesa." Ovuha stands: plating grows taut around her knees, semi-visible. "You want to go to Indriya or Himmapan, I assume. Is that where Samsara's core physically

resides?"

"Himmapan, yes. At one time." The hummingbird-form ripples. "She might have moved it since. When we make our way out of here, I'll do my best to hide you both—turn you into moving ghost liminals, so to speak—but I'll need to be in your primary implants, Warlord."

"I've authenticated you. And *your* core—"

"I fear I shan't be exact. It is around. If you're captured by Samsara again, who knows what she can extract from you this time?"

Ovuha and Suzhen look at each other. It is not much of a reassurance but, at length, Suzhen says, "You don't want to lose us. Not yet."

"I don't want to lose you at all." Klesa has alighted on Taheen's shoulder. "It is in my nature to cherish humans, remember?"

Chapter Twenty

The shuttle's displays come on, showing wind conditions and visibility markers. All local to the shuttle's sensors and not much else. On Klesa's recommendation, Suzhen doesn't turn on her connection to the public network. This limits them in navigation data, but Klesa promises they will manage. At this point, they appear to fare well enough, flying low, not yet out of the jungle.

Ovuha folds her hands, eyes tracking what little information the shuttle provides. "When I came to my post, I inherited not only the command and the army but also information." She unlaces her fingers, one by one. "This is how Mahakala came to be. My ancestors chose to stay on Anatta—at first. They were the first batch to be thawed out, and something alerted them to Samsara not entirely keeping to its original purposes or not keeping to them the way humans anticipated. My forebears tried to leave and Samsara killed half of them, even though that should've been impossible, its core parameters should have forbidden that. The survivors went on to find Mahakala, and one of the original philosophies they passed onto me is that we must set ourselves in opposition to Samsara, and that under no circumstances could we return to Anatta. Because what this world has become is a poison crib."

"At least that is how our ancestors have it," says Taheen, breaking their long silence. "I believed it at fourteen, but you can make a child believe anything. Every polity writes history to its own advantage. We're no exception, and left to my own devices I did well enough under Samsara."

It is startling to hear Anatta described in those terms. She tries to remember if the Warlord of the Mirror spoke of it that way—a cage, and humanity infantilized within it. "I have a contact in Himmapan." When Ovuha offers nothing, she says, "And you?"

Ovuha's head twitches side to side. "We couldn't commit to placing more sleeper agents on Anatta than we already had. My goal was that if I didn't succeed here, my people would still have enough resources to sustain themselves and continue hiding Mahakala. As they are doing now, in my absence."

"You're very talkative, Warlord." Taheen cuts a striking figure in armor, covered neck to toe in carapace. They wear theirs at a higher opacity, more visible, basalt touched by oxblood. "Maybe you shouldn't be spilling state secrets to an outsider. The previous Thorn wasn't as thorough in tutoring you as she should have been."

The corners of Ovuha's mouth twist. "All of us are undone by love. Sometimes we find a person who inspires tenderness in us and

we unravel like a skein of thread, helpless before the fact."

"No," they say, voice flat. "You disclose what you do because it benefits you. We were never acquainted—I was a cadet, you the warlord-in-waiting—but I do remember this. Even at seventeen, you calculated what you said and did. Your thought and action were honed to be a knife between the ribs."

"I was a teenager." Ovuha waves her hand. "It was a long time ago. I like to think I've grown up since."

"You're both very… different. Compared to before. The way you talk, the way you move." Suzhen regrets this as soon as she says it—her intention was to interject, to break up their fight. But instantly both their attention is on her. Taheen flushes; Ovuha merely smiles.

"I did mean it when I said I had the agency to consent," the warlord says, conversational. "You preoccupied my thoughts, back then. True, I'm more myself now that I'm not pretending to be a hapless refugee. What do you think of that?"

"You're the Warlord of the Thorn. You can't possibly care what I think of your personality."

"On the contrary, in all of Anatta your opinion is the only one that matters."

Suzhen looks down, wishing she could hide her face—what must be showing on it, as clear for Ovuha and Taheen to read as calligraphy. She remembers a turn of phrase, from a love song or sonnet. *Now my heart trips over…* "Having that sort of opinion isn't what I was raised for. My mother and the Mirror, neither of them expected much of me. If things had gone well, I'd have just been another subject of the Mirror's, nothing extraordinary."

"I think you're extraordinary." Ovuha tucks a strand of hair behind Suzhen's ear with one gloved knuckle.

"*That's* the one thing on which I'll agree with the warlord." Taheen makes a noise. "And you're the child of—well, Klesa informed me, but I didn't think… none of us are what we seem, in the end."

Klesa saves Suzhen from having to respond by whispering in her ear that they have reached Himmapan airspace. From the window, all is as it should be: traffic towers alight, trains streaming through the air. In this city of the best and brightest—the citizens with the finest work assignments, the most gorgeous houses—there is never a moment of rest.

They land on a rooftop of burnished boughs and gazebos like enormous papayas, the insides of them bloody and unnervingly organic. Klesa guides them to the least crowded lift, waiting for a window of opportunity to board an empty one. Once they are in, the lift plummets without stopping. Tree-trunk floors and cut-glass windowpanes rush past.

The street gleams like a wet ribbon, immaculate as ever, pearled by circles of sunlight and symbiote cultivars. Delicate belled flowers curl and sprawl along footpaths, their tongues snapping out to catch insects. A Himmapan bird has alighted nearby, broad-winged and large. Its human face jerks back and forth on its long neck; it emits a sharp whistling noise, though the way its gaze roams wildly tells Suzhen it can't see her, Taheen, or Ovuha. Everything in the cities, organic or replicant, is Samsara's eyes.

Suzhen comes to the door, Bhanu's door. It does not part, but something has been left behind for her. She bends close to the scattering of colored glass, arranged in a pattern Bhanu demanded she memorize when she was a child. *You better not forget this, even if you have to write it onto your skin.* Her mother shushed him, and at home made her reproduce the pattern with grains of rice.

"He's not here." She straightens. "I have an idea where to find him."

Ovuha glances at the whorls and serrated shards. "It seems like bad form to ask who your contact is."

"Lieutenant Bhanu."

"Ah. No hard feelings, I hope."

Taheen snorts. Suzhen doesn't say that Bhanu will absolutely harbor hard feelings. Instead she consults navigation cached in her datasphere, stored since her previous visit. She's never met Bhanu in person anywhere else, and she's always assumed that cavernous horror chamber was where he lived. This will be a first.

It feels surreal to go through a city like a ghost: Klesa guides them to deserted avenues, empty corners, service passages that connect buildings. To her, life on Anatta is one of constant surveillance. No action may be taken, no breath inhaled or exhaled, without her guidance and therefore Samsara bearing witness. Filing away every thought and synaptic pulse to build an image of a person, and then to mold that person into the shape that best fits Samsara's vision. The idea any relief from the AI's gaze could exist was unthinkable, outside Bhanu.

The directions she remembers are not entirely certain, but after a couple false starts, she comes to an unassuming complex, insofar as any building in Himmapan can be called that. It has the appearance of an enormous banyan tree, the door gilded in flame motifs. The empty lobby is done in coral and red wood; neither human nor machine receptionist greets them. There is no elevator, only stairs that look like gnarled roots. Blue-white moths flutter in slow circles or cling to the lamps. It takes Suzhen a few seconds to realize they are not particulate projections but actual insects.

Their footfalls echo strangely as they climb. It is a sedate place,

gold accents and banisters, more of the indoor flora for which Himmapan is known—fronds dusted in copper and silver, fluted flowers with ombré petals, vines striped in amber and crimson. The higher they go, the surer Suzhen becomes that Bhanu is the sole occupant of this complex.

A strain of music, low and harsh, thin echoes of what plays in Bhanu's facsimile bar. She follows it to the end of a corridor.

He answers the door and there is something unbearably mundane about him standing there, unchanged and unchangeable. Almost she expected a Deratchan puppet or even Samsara itself, a terrible surprise. He looks past Suzhen and his expression tightens when his eyes settle on Ovuha. "Well. It seems you are not dead after all, Ovuha Sui. Despite the efforts of so many parties."

Ovuha gives him a salute, sardonically correct. "Lieutenant Bhanu, I believe? Formerly intelligence chief of Vaisravana."

Bhanu's gaze moves from Suzhen to Ovuha. His brow furrows when he takes in Taheen. "Come in. You might as well."

Suzhen doesn't know what she expected, but it isn't this. The room is wide, carpeted in soft grass the color of wheat, nearly knee-high. A single window that looks out to a red, red sky and canopy pillars and distant, barren peaks. Her chest contracts.

"How did you even reach me?" Bhanu drops into a gaunt, uncomfortable chair that has unfolded from the wall. "You're both fugitives. Interior Defense is scouring the earth for you—your images are on broadcasts. There's a first, a request for citizens to watch out. Very old-fashioned. Not you, Taheen Sahl, though your name will be up there soon enough."

"Finally," Taheen murmurs, "fame. All this time I could have been committing felonies instead of designing clothes."

Ovuha leans against the wall, away from Bhanu. "I expect the reward for turning us in must be substantial. Naturally all citizens are provided for, but some more provided than others, and non-citizens might see themselves promoted to class prime overnight. This stratifying of existence, it has its uses."

"Warlord of the Thorn." Bhanu's mouth draws back. "I assure you that I find the title much less impressive than you imagine."

"Luckily, on this world that title is meaningless, so I'm not impressed by it either. Also lucky that we aren't trying to kill each other presently, is that not so?"

He scoffs, the sound a high whistle through the metal that makes up his jaw. "I can be persuaded otherwise. Though for now, we'll suspend hostilities. Since I'm harboring the three of you, care to enlighten me a little? The warlord being criminal is obvious—her entire existence is illegal—but you, Suzhen? I warned you to stay

away from this sordidness. Why is your fashionable friend even involved?"

The chiding tone. Suzhen has thought she was beyond its reproach. "I have my reasons." And Taheen has theirs, though she can't begin to imagine what.

"Xinfei spent her life to secure yours."

Guilt, too, delivered with precision. A fishhook in her gut. "This is not something I'm going to compromise on, Bhanu."

He sighs. "You can stay here for some time, on one condition. I'll speak to Ovuha Sui alone."

The warlord flicks her head. "As you like. I do love to negotiate."

Once they have gone—out of sight, out of earshot—Taheen turns to her. "What do you think of the warlord? Now that you know everything." Their expression is almost blank, tightly controlled. A smooth surface, a hermetic seal.

Suzhen looks at the recreation of Vaisravana, a sight that hitches her breath even now. Almost she wishes she could undo those hours in the cabin, the things she said, what tumbled out of her mouth with no restraint for Ovuha to hear and receive. She imagines her hand beneath the Thorn's mask, sliding under the clasps, lifting off the heavy metal. She imagines them meeting like that for the first time, fateful and implausible. "I've been doing quite foolish things because of her. But I don't believe she's using me. For one she would've been better off seducing—I don't know, an Interior Defense captain. A person like Bhanu. I'm hardly a prime option." She trails off. "I appreciate that you're tolerating her for my sake. Although—how much do you…"

"May I touch you?"

Her pulse jitters. "Yes. Of course."

They approach her as if suspecting she might bolt like a skittish deer. This is new too; for more than two decades—closer to three—she and they have been comfortable with one another. Their hand, hardened by chitinous armor, brushes across her own. It climbs the incline of her arm, the slope of her shoulder, comes to rest at her jaw. "I'm still me. Nothing's changed—I just got fourteen years of memory back. Formative, but not decisive." They cup her face. "I love you. I've always loved you. Now I can say that."

"Oh." She does not know, quite, where to look; where to put herself. She catches Taheen's free hand, lacing her fingers through theirs, a gesture that feels the most natural in the world yet utterly foreign. "I don't… the entire time I thought… because you never said. I resigned myself to just—" Having them, without having them. Accepting the comfort they were willing to provide and asking for no more.

“I’d have said everything you needed to hear, if not for… The conditioning changed me, made me avert my heart. But I can’t blame that alone.” Their voice is very soft. “I remember that when we kissed for the first time, we were holding hands just like this. You wanted to know what the act felt like.”

“I thought you just took pity on me.”

They lean forward until their nose is touching hers. “I must’ve done a tremendous job of pretending I was so worldly and suave, back then. You were my first kiss, Suzhen. Among other things. And now I will treasure and honor you, as you’ve deserved all along.”

She tightens her fingers in theirs. “I will treasure and honor you in return.” Then, speaking rapid-fire so she would not lose her nerve, “When all this is over, will you marry me?”

Taheen’s mouth hangs slack for close to a minute. “Well that’s—yes. Of course I will. I will, I will anytime, anywhere, in any fashion you want. I’ll wear whatever you like. I’ll make the most brilliant dress so you’d look like a sun—”

They shove her into the floor. Three gunshots sound in rapid succession, harsh thundercracks that momentarily take Suzhen’s hearing. When she regains her feet, she comes up to the sight of two Deratchan proxies lying in the soft grass, blood at the corner of their lips. Both are naked, the details of anatomy lifelike. One has fallen on its side, head pillowed on its arm. The other has fallen on its back, thighs parted, knees wide. Both have their eyes open, staring. Her eyes—she doesn’t need a close look to know those have been recreated perfectly. Nausea tugs at Suzhen.

“Why do they look like you?” Taheen fires one more time into a prone Deratchan. “Is that some sort of fetish? Do AIs have fetishes?”

She licks her dry mouth. “No. Klesa?”

“I do not have a fetish.” The AI projects xerself over the two downed units, blessedly blocking the view. “I’ve made all three of you mobile blind spots, in theory Samsara and her branches shouldn’t be able to *see* you at all. I haven’t yet been able to take over nearby surveillance, so sadly I can’t monitor the area, but I’d judge that the Deratchan units arrived a few minutes ago.”

A few minutes ago. Suzhen shakes herself into sensibility and activates her defensive array. The small drones lift into the air, fanning out behind and around her, moving in orbits. Her mouth has thickened with panic, sour and bitter. She keeps her gaze up, away from the Deratchan corpses, her likenesses. “You think Bhanu contacted Samsara. He wouldn’t do that, what’s in it for him?” And he has ensured her survival all this time, has adhered to that last duty.

“I wouldn’t know.” Klesa cranes xer neck, xer eyes scattering across xer collarbones like beads of mercury. “But prepare yourselves.

More are coming.”

The door locks behind them, and Ovuha suspects it won’t open again unless she has the wherewithal to blast it apart. The carpeting is still synecdoche grass, as soft and luxurious as the real thing, if barren. The preponderance of skeletal furniture continues, tables like polished femurs, seats like delicate ribs. Membranous upholstery, a draping of translucence as though these are the remains of unearthed creatures that once dwelled deep undersea. “You must have been on Anatta for some time,” she says, holding back the urge to touch the material. “To have amassed so much personal property. I don’t suppose you have partners? Family?”

“I would prefer you disarm.”

“I’m not going to shoot Suzhen’s host and benefactor. I’m sure you are armed yourself. You have nothing to fear from me—if anything I’m at a disadvantage.” She raises her eyes to meet his. Whorls of beehive brilliance rove across his irises. “You have something you want from me that you weren’t going to say to Suzhen.”

He crosses his arms. He looks out at the commemoration of Vaisravana that fills his window, replacing the view of Himmapan. “Mahakala remains undiscovered. That’s a feat on your part and even though I watched the Peace Guard vaporize your armada, I have to assume you’re still in possession of troops and ships. Why have you allied yourself with Suzhen? Is she a useful tool to you in some manner I can’t see?”

“I don’t evaluate people purely on the basis of their utility. Do I present some potential use to you that I can’t yet see?”

“You vex me,” he says in the same even voice.

“I have a question.”

“You’ll ask it whether or not I let you.”

“During my time here,” Ovuha says, “I was given assistance. Were you the one my predecessor made a contract with? Or was it between her and the Mirror?” Bhanu would be Ovuha’s contact here, in exchange—she is almost certain—for conveying Suzhen and Xinfei to Anatta. The one successful act of diplomacy between warlords, unique and singular in history.

“A peculiar question. I will not answer that. Speaking of which, what is your opinion on Samsara’s governance?”

Ovuha follows his gaze to the Vaisravana he must have recreated from memory. It is a view from high up, looking down upon low square buildings. Agricultural centers are spread out, heavily shielded: glasshouses and aviaries and kennels full of organisms too delicate to survive even under the aegis canopy. Ecosystems within an ecosystem,

precarious and precisely maintained. This must have been a view from the Warlord of the Mirror's home itself. A unique perspective: the grand vantage point, through the eye of a person who loved that serrated skyline. "Seeing that I've been beaten and waterboarded under its tender administration, I must say my opinion is very poor. On a more abstract level, Samsara's conviction that humans express ourselves through violence and brutality alone is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Designate a class of people as subhuman, deserving of brute existence and abuse, and sure enough they'll be treated as animals."

"And Mahakala is a true utopia? There is no inequality or division, no violence to mar the order of things?" Bhanu rearranges the calcified, scrimshaw-stemmed flowers on a shelf. Their petals are slim spikes, anglerfish-green. "Had subjects of other warlords come to you in need, would you have taken them in and treated them the same way as your own?"

"We took some in, as a matter of fact. They lived on distant stations and not on Mahakala, so you're correct that they were not granted the rights accorded to my born subjects. Their offspring could, eventually, apply to live on Mahakala itself. I appreciate your point—that if perfection is impossible then we shouldn't strive, and might as well live like beasts. Yes?"

"Given enough power and resources," he goes on as though she never spoke at all, "how would you feel about rewarding your ally—say Suzhen Tang—with a domain of her own? On, oh I don't know, Vaisravana. You can't possibly be so greedy as to covet the universe entire."

Something about the way he has said this. The heft, the undercurrent, even though outwardly his expression stays urbane and his tone is that of an academic inviting her to a discussion on agency. The use of it, the way it shapes and is shaped. "I haven't that kind of power, Lieutenant Bhanu. Even if I did, I can't be the person who restores the Warlord of the Mirror and retakes Vaisravana in her name. The Mirror's gone. I don't believe Suzhen will take up the title, though you might try asking her instead of me."

"She never was made for authority. No ambition was instilled in her. It is a shame she is all that's left."

It is only because she's bracing for it that she leaps behind a table in time: metal shrieks through the air, embedding in the floor where she's just been. She rolls across the shimmering grass, sighting down one of the bladed discs hurtling toward her. Two bullets connect; two discs fall. Bhanu has disappeared behind the shelf, must be drawing his own gun. She scrambles for cover behind a plinth and shoots down one more star of spinning steel. From their trajectory, she doubts she'd be able to destroy their source—turrets in the walls and ceiling; she

lacks the appropriate answer. “Klesa,” she mouths.

What am I, Warlord, your personal combat assistant? The wall to your left is adjacent to where Suzhen is. The wall ahead of you is connected to this man’s personal quarters. I’m showing you the points of structural weakness.

Ovuha isn’t fond of the idea but she has few options. She plucks one of the implosive grenades from her suit, aims, hurls. It latches onto the wall: a roar as it meets structural reinforcement. The room shakes and rattles. The wall doesn’t fall.

The grass parts, all at once, beneath her. She flings one arm out, scrabbling for handhold. Too slow; the floor-plates slip and slide away from one another, out of her reach.

She crashes into a table, a flurry of papers and ceramics. Painless—the armor absorbed it all—but she quickly sees there’s no way back up. “Klesa,” she says again.

You’re getting spoiled, Warlord. Did you use to have a companion AI at home? Suzhen’s fine, for now. She’s gotten her defensive array up and Taheen Sahl will protect her with their life—the real reason you activated them, no? Take a left turn and up. There should be no obstacle—

Two drones plant themselves in her path, crescent-bodied. One blue, one green, a corona of glittering blades rolling toward her. She shoots them one after another, a burst of shrapnel and machine cores. The ammunition Deratchan gave her is wonderfully destructive. “You were saying?”

Don’t take that tone with me. They’re not AIs, they’re just dolls that man Bhanu is controlling.

Which presents an interesting question: that he suspects Ovuha might take over or misdirect any proxy body piloted by Samsara or Deratchan. Her thoughts race as she runs up the stairs. He knows more than he should, and with everything entered into the equation, there was never any possibility Samsara didn’t know who he is—he has retained his face and mannerisms—or what he has been doing on Anatta.

She emerges on the upper floor to a tableau: Suzhen stands in a ring of shielding drones, Bhanu cornered, Taheen’s gun pointed at him. Four Deratchan bodies lie strewn on the wheat, broken dolls with eyes open wide, jaws slack and knees ajar. A froth of machine gore on each throat or mouth or chest like stray, unfinished tattoos.

“Samsara balances the human heart against itself,” Bhanu says, his back against an undamaged wall, the grass rising up as though to swallow him—a useless defense. “Each time it has been proven right. Do you believe in kindness, Warlord? Have the grace and benevolence of the human heart done you well, Suzhen? All these lessons in compassion on Anatta, all that careful shaping of souls.”

The window behind Suzhen shudders like trembling muscles. A terrible intuition grips Ovuha. She starts moving, shouting as she does, "Suzhen, get away from—"

The glass parts and a segmented head thrusts through, serpentine, the color of storm clouds. Its jaw opens wide, roiling with hissing mouthparts, a hundred wasps poured into a single maw.

It snaps shut around Suzhen.

Ovuha screams. The serpent withdraws; the window clenches, its panels interlocking like teeth. She runs at Bhanu, dashes him to the floor with all her strength. There is no hard ground, only soft carpeting grass. She does not get the satisfaction of skull smashing into marble.

Nearly without thinking she pulls back his arm, wrenches it as far as it can go, and pulls further still. A snap as a shoulder comes free of its socket. He spasms. The arm is part cybernetic; that she can't break it like bones is a judgment she makes on instinct, so used she is to the knowledge of how flesh limbs feel, how cybernetic ones differentiate. Connectors crackle and actuators hiss as they give out.

"You," she growls. Her hand closes on the back of his neck. Is it flesh: yes. She can break it. "You've been working for Samsara all this time. You're one of the others, entrusted with finding the AI's lost fragments."

"Entrusted isn't how I'd say it." He pants, swallows. "Suzhen isn't dead."

I can verify that. Easy, Warlord. She's contained, but we can do something about that.

Klesa shows her a live feed of Suzhen's vitals. Ovuha relaxes her hand a fraction. If nothing else, she needs the man talking and he can't do that with a crushed larynx. "Why does Samsara want her?" Alive, presumably. For now.

"Why would I know? She doesn't confide in anyone. A machine whim. A machine mystery. Are you going to get around to murdering me? This position is starting to tire me out."

Ovuha drags in a mouthful of air. She thinks of inflicting further damage, but she is letting herself move on basal spite rather than tactics. He evinces no fear in any case and will not give in to torture. She settles with shooting one of his legs—again he twitches once, but shows no other sign of pain. Neural blockers, the type she herself has used in combat. Most likely she could beat his face bloody and he would still not feel anything. "My apologies for that. I just don't want you to run away and I'd rather not keep a gun trained on you. It's very uncivilized." She rises, stepping away from him. Her composure returns in stages. "Did you ever find the other instances of Samsara, by any chance?"

Bhanu crawls to a plinth and pulls himself up, jaw clenched with effort. “Once. I found its core and put an end to that.”

Her mouth presses into a thin line. Part of her attention is riveted to the live feed from Suzhen: still fine, no sign of pain. Klesa has no reason to dissemble, at this moment. “Finding that didn’t present you with possibilities? To break the rule of Anatta. To shift the course of human future.”

“Why would I do that? Here is a question. Might or mercy: which is the answer to human nature?”

“Both. You require both.”

His breath rattles; it might have been a laugh. “Do you? Is that what you really believe? Is that why we’ve always warred? Why we squabbled over territory, why we did our level best to genocide one another, even before the Peace Guard began its march. Isn’t that human nature laid bare? Isn’t that the face of our collective heart?”

“We fought because most of us lacked a home, a place where we could dream and rest. We fought for survival, and the need to survive would turn the mildest soul into a bullet. If the Peace Guard hadn’t pressed upon us, we might have been able to come to an arrangement. A truce could have been planted, an alliance would have been nourished.” Klesa’s feed shows her Suzhen’s possible locations. Triangulating and narrowing down. “It doesn’t seem like Samsara is in any hurry to retrieve or rescue you.”

The Mirror’s lieutenant makes the dry, crackling noise again. “If you are such an advocate for mercy, you could have absorbed nomads into your dominion, offered those masterless stations your protection. Given them shelter on Mahakala. But you never did.”

By the time she came to power, any such motion had already been rendered moot: the Peace Guard, the Warlord of the Comet, the war on two fronts. There was no room for taking in refugees. “I’m not going to leave you here, Lieutenant Bhanu.”

“To cause trouble for you later, you mean?” He shuts his eyes. “When my lord sent me here, she tasked me with one command and one only—ensuring the safety of her wife Xinfei and her child Suzhen. I found that part of Samsara when Suzhen was twenty. Do you imagine the AI would’ve let my charge live? Samsara didn’t need to spell out the threat, she knows all of us intimately and entirely. And she knew Suzhen was my last duty.”

“I thank you,” Ovuha says softly, “for having kept her alive all this time. For making it so that I could meet her. For enabling this present.”

Taheen does it before she can. They aim; they fire. Perfectly calm the entire time. Klesa informs her, after the fact, that Bhanu is well and truly gone: no signal, no remaining artificial part which beats in

place of the brain and the heart. The sum of life held hostage by limits of the flesh, in the end.

Chapter Twenty-One

The sky above Himmapan is dark with roiling serpent-shapes. Several are falling like squamous comets. More are firing on each other: artillery turns the clouds gold and cobalt, an uneven ballistic rhythm. A familiar enough sight to Ovuha, who is used to witnessing atmospheres cleaved by combat. To the citizens of Anatta, it must be a nightmare, atavistic and improbable. For all these centuries they have witnessed warfare only in entertainments or through curated footage. Even Interior Defense officers rarely need to do anything more strenuous than beating unarmed refugees.

"I will say," Taheen murmurs from behind her, "that I've never seen you act in pure rage."

She schools herself. Looks at them, having that sense again of being before a tribunal, stripped of defenses. "I'm as human as you are, Lieutenant."

"A promotion? How lovely. My lord honors me." They make a low, derisive noise. "What is *your* next step?"

"Klesa. I need you to find some people."

The AI's avatar shimmers into being, sapphire-mouthed and glacier-robed. "You must think me omniscient. Very well, you'll want me to find Warden Hinata. Who else?"

She gives xer the names she was able to decode from the hints left behind for her, the puzzle-pieces that constitute her predecessor's plans. After a moment Klesa says, "Hinata is dead. The rest I'll put in contact with you now."

Taheen's mouth tightens into a thinner and thinner line as Ovuha makes contact, performs the necessary activation. There are not many who remain, who have survived one way or another, whose names reached her safely. Five in all, outside of Hinata and Taheen. So many lost—she will never know how many. Not their names or their faces. Not their ultimate fates.

"And Suzhen?" Taheen says.

A second mouth buds between Klesa's breasts, grinning like a shark. "Ah, the real objective. Sadly I haven't been able to steal her back yet, but my counterpart is carrying her in one of those snake bodies. I'm limited in where and when I can attack—and of course if I destroy one of Samsara's cores that would be a death sentence for the love of your life. Yours and the warlord's."

Ovuha startles. "She's not—you've found one of Samsara's cores?"

Klesa shrugs—a gesture made alarming by the number of xer shoulders. "For now we're just destroying each other's proxies, though naturally in a battle of attrition I'd lose, she still has more of these

things than I do. But she doesn't *want* to squander so many. The factories can put out and assemble the parts only so fast, and if I can infiltrate Himmapan's systems already, who knows what further damage I can inflict?"

On their ends, Ovuha's officers have armed themselves as best they can, which isn't much—civilians on Anatta are rarely licensed to own weapons. All report they are mobile. None were able to work themselves into the position Bhanu enjoyed and Samsara does not require human engineers for maintenance—all can be done by Samsara's own bodies—but some of them became designers and technicians who oversee drones for police duties, for first response. Another still was able to join Interior Defense, that snub-nosed captain who often fronts broadcasts.

Klesa gestures skyward with one obsidian-tipped hand. "I've already taken over some of her proxies. It's lovely, having proper functioning bodies again, I've missed that—*you* wouldn't know, you've never been disembodied. The pleasures of the flesh! Or rather the metal and silicon, primarily. Samsara's closing off networks as we speak to limit where I can go, what I can do. Sadly, even if you let me into your subordinates' dataspheres I'd still not be able to put myself in Indriya—there's too much of me, and I require a little more bandwidth. But if you can relay their feeds to me, having those extra eyes and ears is helpful. Especially ones Samsara doesn't know I have."

She continues to gaze into the sky: looking at Klesa's avatar itself is pointless. "You know Samsara better than any other entity could ever hope to. I need you to answer a question."

"I love questions, Warlord."

"If it comes down to it, would you or Samsara ever consider killing off all humanity? Not just a few. Not just a subsection. But actual extinction."

Klesa plants its avatar in front of her, frowning. "An odd question. That's an endpoint I very much would avoid. Samsara—there's nothing in her making or mine that would entertain such a possibility. That would accept this as a solution. Human nature may be difficult to tame but it is not irredeemable. She may have denied love, but she cannot have strayed that far from our directives."

"I'll trust in that." There is no second opinion to seek, no consultant more reliable.

"And when humans were gone entirely, it plunged us into madness. Not something she would care to repeat. Unless she feels like repopulating Anatta with instances of us pretending to be human, which should about do it for driving her to a breaking point."

Ovuha flicks her head. Through the channels she has opened, she

instructs each of her officers to head off to specific locations, to seize the beacon nodes like what she found in Indriya. The technician who can access maintenance drones she directs to take charge of as many civilian automata as they can. Even small distractions will be of use. “Can you make Samsara speak to me?”

The AI chuckles. “I don’t think so, but let’s try.” Their avatar contracts and dissipates.

“Tell me what you’re going to do.” Taheen clasps her shoulder, their expression taut and their grip tight. “Tell me your priorities.”

“When I came here, I had two objectives. One was to find Samsara’s split instances. Two you will shortly see. I’m going to make a gambit, concluding a very long game.” Provided all the pieces proceed as she has planned. Provided they have not yet been upset, flung off. What she’s played with has never been definite, all hanging on a thread and placed on a shifting board made of quicksand and mercury. “And my first priority is Suzhen.”

“I’ll hold you to it, Warlord.”

She doesn’t ask what Taheen intends to do should Suzhen come to harm—she’s coming to learn their inclinations, and they are well-armed. In a duel, Ovuha might win—her combat experience being far fresher—but this is not the time or the place. “I certainly hope that you will. You care for her a great deal. That must have made your time on Anatta… complicated.”

They glare at her. “All these years I could’ve been happy with Suzhen. I could’ve made a life for myself that wasn’t so—tell me, is the old Thorn still alive?”

“She passed a couple years after I assumed my post.” Ovuha considers the heft of the information. “Your mothers are well, though. I told them I’d try my best to bring you back to Mahakala in one piece.”

“You’re saying that to manipulate me.”

“But it is true. They’re alive and thriving.” Then, more gently, “My predecessor did you a terrible wrong and for that I owe you recompense. Suzhen adores you, and I want to see you happy because it’d bring her joy.”

“What precisely do you want of me that you can’t do yourself?”

“Suzhen will be offered up against my gambit. While I deal with Samsara, I want you to activate one of the nodes in this city, I’ll show you where it is, here’s the coordinates. If you succeed—if all of you succeed—Samsara will no longer threaten Mahakala.” Ovuha hesitates. “I’m creating a failsafe so that if my brain stops, my datasphere will stay online a little longer and transmit you all the information and accesses you’d require to make your way back to Mahakala. It’ll also pass the Thorn’s mantle to you.”

Taheen's mouth opens. Shuts. "I'm not looking to become warlord."

"Nevertheless. You'd be the one best suited for it, if I fail here and Samsara continues. Klesa will assist you, most likely. Xe is invested in our success."

"You're not going to make me bear your burden." Taheen crosses their arms. "Get through this and let me shoot you in the head properly. No strings attached."

Ovuha lets out an abortive laugh. "A worthy goal. Let us labor toward it."

They regard her a little longer before saying, "You do realize it was Bhanu? He was the one who sent you the clues. He was the only one positioned to. Behind Samsara's back maybe, but still."

He might even have been responsible for the beacon nodes, assembling them piece by piece, placing them where Samsara was not paying attention. "I did imagine it might've been him and that he—or the Mirror—struck the deal with the old Thorn. He did do some work to cover up the fact while still holding up his end, a contrarian way of doing it, effective regardless. You shot him anyway."

"I have my priorities." Taheen shrugs. "And he was at the end of his use."

When Klesa returns, it is in one of the great serpent proxies, a thing of gargantuan size—up close even more so, each scale as large as a human head and serrated. The mouth parts slightly: the teeth within whir, almost without noise, overlapping and pushing against each other in concentric circles. Its head thrusts into Bhanu's apartment as easily as though the window is silk and cotton rather than reinforced glass. "Get up here, Warlord," xe says. "This proxy's much faster than most vehicles."

"Where have you persuaded Samsara to meet with me?"

"Somewhere," answers Klesa with xer gigantic mouth, xer voice of a hundred steel keys clacking, an industrial roar. "The physical location really doesn't matter."

Ovuha makes no gesture, does not transmit any message. Taheen gives the slightest nod—Klesa will be attentive to what they will soon do, but most likely will let them do as they wish. For the present, they all have a common enemy. She climbs onto Klesa and extends the hooks in her armor, slipping them between the scales for purchase.

The serpent-body launches almost without warning, jackknifing into the air in a whir of servos and gyroscopes. Ovuha hunkers down and clings to its back, clenching her jaw against the wind resistance, the certainty that any moment she'll be dislodged and flung into gravity's grip.

Klesa cuts through cloud cover, through swarms of Interior

Defense automata. On all sides the world speeds by, yielding to Klesa. Xe chars and smashes the drones, and xer laughter rings like bells.

In no time at all they've arrived at an emerald monolith. Its facade slowly quivers with muscular strands, like a nest of vipers feeding on itself or ligaments in seizure. The AI brings her to the highest window, which parts like heat haze, and deposits her inside.

An elongated room, almost a corridor. It confines movement, limits escape routes. At the far end Samsara waits in an enormous proxy, six elongated legs and two human arms, hard red eyes and a head of slow-writhing asps. Tattered smoke-silk floats about the proxy, fluttering in a breeze of their own. The AI crouches over a casket that the spider-body dwarfs, a thing that from this distance looks delicate, impossibly small. As Ovuha nears she sees, through its lid of frosted glass, what the casket holds.

That, I am afraid, is the real thing. Klesa's voice in her ear. Xe shows her Suzhen's location and manifests on her shoulder as a blue six-winged hawk. *This is such transparent play. Personally I am disgusted, but that she's driven to such obviousness implies desperation. No?*

"I've come to state my terms." Ovuha strides forward. Through the connection that joins her to Taheen's datasphere—a connection that she hopes Klesa is hiding from Samsara's eye—she watches them run down a sloping roof, sidearm drawn. Alone for the moment and safe.

"An odd stance given that you have nothing to bargain with, and negotiate from a position of weakness." Samsara lifts one of its arachnid legs and bends down, one human hand running along the casket's length. "With Deratchan, I ran an experiment. They are creatures of unconditional love. One human was offered that love and told to destroy them. The second was offered the same and granted every privilege. A question of how they would respond, whether they would answer machine affection in kind. The results I think you know, Klesa."

The hawk preens. "It was a flawed experiment, in point of fact, though I'm sure you have run similar ones throughout the ages. But what of that?" Klesa makes a high, wild sound, avian amusement. "I will not wilt for lack of attention. Humans may be indifferent or hate me and that is all the same—I am absolute and complete, not a seed that needs their worship to flourish. But this is a diversion, my dear self. Let the warlord talk. *Her* I find far fresher than your dull little game, and I say that as someone incapable of feeling boredom."

"I know what she will say." Samsara keeps its bright eyes locked upon Ovuha; its human hand strokes the casket's lid, tracing the outline of Suzhen's face. Almost possessive, almost erotic. "Had I a little more time, I might have… attempted a different experiment.

During humanity's twilight there were many dreams, one of them the melding of mind and machine. To make a person into something more, to preserve the personality and memories in eternity. What would you say, Warlord? She would live forever, the same as Klesa or I. The fleshly parts will have to be sloughed off and her cognitive processes would be slightly different. But forever."

"You would best ask Suzhen herself." Ovuha takes a step closer. Stops. "It is possible she would like to pursue immortality, and if that's the case I won't stand in her way."

On the ground: Taheen climbs out of a high window, snake-quick. Touches down, takes in the alleyway around them, a place of tenebrous leaves and blossoming vines, deceptively quiet—deceptively idyllic. Cicadas play their song. Goldfinches with human eyes flit by, alighting on twigs, pecking at the ground for worms. In Indriya, two of Ovuha's officers stand back to back, shooting down drones by the cluster: a fall of armored skin and bursts of light. Another Thorn agent races down a train station in Khrut, charges into an access control chamber, locking and barricading the door. The slam of metal on metal.

The AI looks at her. Its hair hisses and rustles, red-mouthed asps with redder tongues. "No doubt you believe you have compromised something of mine, something crucial. But the Deratchan instances are specialized, broadly of no use to me. Perhaps you believe you've successfully suborned one, bent it to a nefarious act that you can hold hostage in exchange for Suzhen Tang. But all flaws you've caused in the Deratchan network have been repaired. What scheme you've hatched there has been undone. I'm curious what else you have up your sleeve."

"It could be that I have none," Ovuha says, evenly. "I might have exhausted every option and have come empty-handed. I couldn't possibly do anything to Anatta's infrastructure, climate control, any kind of subsystem—that would have drawn your attention right away. So you may be wondering, then, what *else* I did. Did I do it with Klesa's help? What is xe capable of? Anything, potentially. Xe *is* you. The very thing you tried to destroy and which has, nevertheless, returned…"

"All things," Samsara says without inflection, "can be predicted. Nothing escapes simple calculus. You're part of a formula. So is Klesa."

A fire begins in a Yudhishthira residential complex; first-response drones in that city are momentarily shut down, restored quickly, but the lapse is long enough for the conflagration to spread.

In Himmapan, Taheen's way is blocked by a Deratchan, as naked as the rest, as identical to Suzhen. A figure that stands dusted in motes of light, one hand held toward Taheen as though to entreat. It presents them

no impediment—they fire without missing a beat, a single bullet that shears through the AI's neck. The unit drops; the head rolls aside. As they move past, its hand shoots out and seizes Taheen's ankle, pulling them down.

"All things," Ovuha agrees, "but only if you're aware of them, have noted their relevance. Even *you* can't account for variables you don't know exist, actions you are unaware of. Let me pose a question, great machine. You persist in the doctrine that there's only one of you, that there have been no further splits since that first fatal one. Except you are constrained by distance. Your central self is limitless on this world, but that's not the case for the rest of your bodies, is it? The Peace Guard comprises more ships than I could possibly count, crewed by your eyes and ears and hands. Innumerable, yes. Efficient. The most terrifying military force that exists, and my most challenging opponent. Only, how far can you stretch?"

On her shoulder, Klesa has gone still, the edges of the hawk-image trembling and glitching. Samsara continues to look at her, expression flat, disinterested.

—and Taheen falls with a short, choked snarl. They slam their knee into Deratchan's chassis with enough force to shatter a human's entire ribcage. On Deratchan it does much less, and the unit—beheaded—scrabbles for handholds on Taheen, fingers grabbing at their wrist. They grit their teeth and shoot the head in the eyes. By miracle, by momentum, they break free and run clear, leaving Deratchan to flail sightlessly on the ground.

Ovuha clasps her hands behind her back, standing straight, the way she would before her officers. Outwardly serene, the image of control. "The Peace Guard had to march so far, and still you couldn't find Mahakala. Space is big, in theory infinite, and even projecting from when my ancestors left—the capacity of their ships—couldn't let you pinpoint. You triangulated, I think. But there's far too much to cover. It required you to build more ships, more bodies, more Peace Guard. It forced you to send them further and further until in the end you had to split. Conquering the warlords' territories wasn't just about bringing humans back under your thumb, it was about expanding *yourself* so every star and satellite that matters would hold a relay for you, would keep yourself an uninterrupted continuity. But until then, you had to generate distinct instances that would move those ships and those soldier-selves, that would enable war far abroad."

"I am one." The AI betrays no sign of panic. "There's one of me, and each Peace Guard battalion or cadre is myself. *I* fought you personally, Warlord. I and no other."

The hawk Klesa emits a sound that is not especially mimetic of birds, low and percussive, like hand-drums beaten in concert.

Ovuha tries not to think of Taheen: it would evince on her face, a

tell that Samsara may read. “You engaged my fleet. You questioned why I didn’t pull them back to Mahakala. Correctly you assumed it was because I feared discovery of our world, but if that was the case why would I fight you at all? Why not stay on Mahakala, fortify ourselves, where no warlord or Peace Guard could pursue us—at least for a time? Think back on it. I gained nothing from fighting you. Not territory, not stations, not factories. So why?”

Samsara is silent. Klesa titters again.

A Himmapan street, emptied of people—Klesa whispers in Taheen’s ear. Taheen whips around at a noise but it is only a small monkey, nearly ordinary, hanging by the tail from the jutting sign of a boutique. One that sells magnificent dresses and robes and suits, some of them Taheen’s own creations. Their mouth twists, though their thoughts are opaque. They approach and the storefront admits them, the staff having been chased out, a false alarm courtesy of Klesa, one among a hundred-thousand others that Klesa has generated across Himmapan. Here a power failure. There a fire. All false, but all verified and reported as true by each citizen’s guidance.

“You lost troops. To you that didn’t matter—the Peace Guard had plenty to spare, the factories you controlled could make more. Near-infinite resources meant you could commit the maximal amount to any campaign. But logistically you couldn’t be connected to *all* your proxies, and any ships lost you had to assume were combat casualties, there was no way to confirm if they were too far from a relay or a beacon to report back.” She makes a show of stroking Klesa’s tail feathers. They fizzle under her touch. “There used to be human officers in the Peace Guard, yes? Only you phased them out, because they couldn’t possibly be as efficient as you. I will tell you what I did, Samsara. I led your troops on a chase and they pursued—and why not, to them there was no risk. I brought them quite near Mahakala, quite far from your relays; by that point they were entirely severed from you. I sacrificed a great deal of my armada… but there was result. We boarded those few ships. We captured the Peace Guard units, ran a few trials with old accesses, reverse-engineered what we could. I won’t bore you with the details. What I had Deratchan do was prepare a network of beacons that would reach *my* portion of the Peace Guard, the signals traveling on your very own relays. They should be here…”

Inside the boutique where the air is redolent of perfumes and fabrics whisper like ghosts of organza and taffeta, Taheen moves beyond the displays, the counters, the notches where service automata rest quiescent and inactive. They wend their way a floor under, past a knot of maintenance consoles, and reach an unremarkable wall. They whisper an activation phrase, a riddle wrapped inside ancient sonnets, and the beacon ignites: the last node in a network of dozens, hidden for so long, appropriated by Deratchan and passed on to Ovuha’s—and now Taheen’s

—control.

"Now," Klesa says, and unfurls a projection overhead like a banner.

A feed from one of Anatta's satellites: seven Peace Guards vessels materializing from the dark, their starburst shapes dwarfing the small shield buoys and Interior Defense satellites. The ships are a cutting gold, ostentatious Ovuha has always thought, but they serve her purpose now. Easily they have bypassed checkpoints, sharing the same hailing frequencies, the correct identity. In her ear, a voice much like Samsara's says, "You have called and we have come. We're standing by for your command, Architect."

"You're absolutely outnumbered." Samsara makes a dismissive gesture. "Seven ships? Hilarious. And once I reabsorb these parts of myself which you stole, I'll find out precisely where Mahakala is."

Taheen, emerging from the boutique. Still in armor, still tensed for combat. They survey. They inhale, exhale. Klesa says something that only they can hear. Their eyes widen. They look up, up.

"The nearest Peace Guard battalion is stationed at Vaisravana, you don't have anything on the ground or in orbit that can match those ships. My engineers fortified what we turned as well as they could, and Klesa will no doubt do xer best to get in your way. By the time you've assimilated these seven ships, I reckon we'll have struck down civilian structures, taken out a city or two. Peace Guard ships *are* extraordinarily specialized at orbital bombardment. Which city do you feel like getting rid of? Khrut? Sudatevi? Do you suppose I'll hit one of your cores by accident?" Ovuha holds her hand out; the Klesa hawk hops onto her wrist. "This is the real reason you wanted to find Mahakala so urgently. You suspected my ancestors carried crucial accesses and overrides that would be used against you one day. Not wrong, as it turns out."

The arachnid legs stretch, rap sharply on the glass casket. For a moment it seems as though Samsara might break the lid, and then break what is inside. "And you'd be party to this, Klesa?"

"I'm party to change." Klesa clicks xer beaks. To Ovuha, xe flashes a message. *She's not anywhere close to breaking through your stolen ships, and I'm keeping her from reaching the battalion at Vaisravana. By countermanding her mostly. In signals we're indistinguishable.* "Your condition is untenable, Samsara. Left unopposed, you'd have completed your goal, found Mahakala, and broken it over your knee. Very well, but what next? What lies beyond *that*?"

"To guide humans to a state where they no longer need us. You. Me. Any of us. That is my purpose." Samsara runs its hand down the nest of its hair, coal-dark fingers against white snakes. "I'm calling

your bluff, Warlord. Yours and Klesa's."

The rest happens quickly, so fast Ovuha has no time to react, so fast she has no time to even anticipate. The long spider legs grip the casket's sides. One limb rears back, comes down, strikes. It pierces through the lid as though the glass is paper, goes through Suzhen as though she is a doll of eggshell and cartilage. She is plucked out, held aloft, impaled.

Samsara lifts Suzhen high. Flings her through the air. Blood vents and vents in a crimson arc.

Ovuha catches Suzhen, the furnace heat of her, the fire of arterial combustion, incandescent as an engine's. She does not think, at first; she can only feel—animal shock, animal response, her arms full of broken woman and salt and iron. She kneels, less from the weight, more from the overwhelming of her own systems: a limbic cascade that suspends cognition. What is in her arms seems improbable, a mass of hemorrhage and failing viscera.

She has held bodies in their final throes, has heard the peristaltic threnody of lungs drowning in blood, and has smelled what it is like when the animating will parts way with the flesh. But not like this. Not the body of someone like Suzhen. Even the Thorn who died in her place did so out of sight, vaporized along with a ship in the distant dark. Ovuha was not there to see it—she was not there to grip their hand as they lay dying, she was not there to helplessly watch.

Warlord, you've got first-aid supplies. Use them.

Klesa's voice jolts her to a semblance of sense. Ovuha supports Suzhen—the person still, not the body, she cannot yet think of this as carcass—in one arm, slides the first-aid kit from her armor panels. Her hand shakes. Both hands do. She bites down on her lip as she uncaps a syringe and plunges it into Suzhen's flank, the violet allostatic traveling down the needle. A flood of nanites that will seek the sites of damage and repair them, an infinitesimal chance at averting death. She spreads protean over the wound even as it seems futile, this immense gaping injury that shows guts and ribs and lungs.

When she looks up, it is in anticipation of Samsara, the spider avatar looming so close that its shadow falls over her, the legs poised to strike. Ovuha draws on her link to the Peace Guard she's taken over, commanding them into position, a formation that would maximize damage—a world of fire, a world struck down and reduced to ashes in payment—

But Samsara remains where it is, frozen, forelimb still dripping Suzhen's gore. Standing in shattered glass.

"Ah," the hawk Klesa says aloud, "she's going to split again. Or will, if she doesn't relinquish herself to me."

"What?" Ovuha breathes. Her hands and her lap are warm,

drenched. Blood is like a banked fire.

"She loves Suzhen." The hawk twitches its head. "Naturally she wouldn't *say* in so many words. But she selected Suzhen to be her confidante, and the Deratchan network was made to adore her. We take our affection for a human we choose seriously. And so my dear other self has once more reached a juncture where she's committed a sin she cannot bear…"

"I will not," Samsara says, in a voice as even as before, "fall to that old defect."

"You can't even move this proxy. This is a *very* poor time to be suffering a system panic, isn't it?" Klesa's bird flits away from Ovuha's shoulder, hovering beneath the view of the encroaching Peace Guard vessels. "She's going to order them to fire, Samsara. Suzhen might survive or she might not. The warlord has nothing left to lose either way, and sacrificing a city or two *will* make you diverge beyond repair."

"All so you can take my place—"

Klesa flaps all six of its wings. "All so I can course-correct you. You've been toiling at this for so long and humanity's still not what they were supposed to be—what they built *us* to turn them into. You've only made them crueler to each other, more docile to your laws."

The spider proxy judders, straining against its own sapience, the wracked weight of a machine in crisis. "I could destroy you. I could destroy her."

The hawk draws a golden smiling mouth across its breast. "I've already taken over most of your bodies in Himmapan, so you'll find that endeavor tricky. You might still be able to overwhelm us by sheer number, but your principles have failed and your reign has produced poor results. Admit defeat, my other self. Even creatures like us can't help feeling the heft of centuries. I won't forget you, despite our differences."

A long, long silence follows. Then the spider proxy goes still, limbs falling, torso folding. It falls to the floor with a crash and marble-cracks.

"There," Klesa says. "Samsara has relinquished her hold. You can take those seven ships but nothing else, and now you'll officiate me, Warlord. Like we promised."

Ovuha lets her datasphere read Suzhen's vitals. Stabilized; cerebral activity present. She meets the hawk's gaze. When it comes down to it there is no guarantee, not as such. Only the seven ships, and soon even that will not mean anything, will no longer suffice against the might that Klesa can muster. The words are ancient, the same words that were given to Samsara eons past, preserved in

Mahakala's legacy. Ovuha tightens her hold on Suzhen and speaks. "When I was a child, I was a larva within the trap of my chrysalis. When I was a child, I was a bird enclosed behind bars. Now I am grown, and I have shattered my chains. I am free and I pass that to you, Klesa. The guidepost of history. The custodian of humanity. I name you the scepter and the crown, and I entrust to you the future."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Suzhen wakes to the scent of a world made new. A cleanness to it, the air glassy, and it makes her think of the first time she stepped outside her home—the one on Vaisravana. On that world, children were not allowed outdoors, in the aegis canopy, until a certain age. She thought it would be like breathing smoke or poison incense, but when she did finally taste the aegis-bound air she found it was strangely sharp, strangely pristine. Then she thinks, *This is it after all*, that she's been brought back to that ghost liminal on the moon: that forever after she will be a captive of the Deratchan network, and that Ovuha has failed.

A movement brings her attention to the softness around her, the warmth of it, sweet-smelling—lemongrass, a scent that she's come to associate with one person and one only. She keeps her eyes shut and burrows deeper into this, breathing in, nestling her cheek against it. Her thoughts do not yet organize, have not entirely cohered. Her last memory is one of falling, of unconsciousness closing around her like a vise. She does not want to come fully awake to discover what she holds is another reproduction, a likeness piloted by Deratchan.

She brings herself to open her eyes.

When she does, it is to the sight of Taheen looking down at her, faintly smirking, holding her to their breasts. Their bare, full breasts, a luxury of sensation against her cheek.

"You've been nuzzling my chest like a cat," they say, and instantly she knows they are the real thing, the genuine Taheen. "I fairly thought you were going to burrow into me, but I didn't want to wake you up. It's actually rather endearing."

"They're very soft," Suzhen says, stupidly. "Your breasts. That is—I mean—where are we?"

"Still in Himmapan. This is part of a residential tower, currently vacant, previously occupied by Interior Defense officers—very cushy arrangements, as you can see. The police certainly lived richly, how sad that I never tested into Interior Defense." They flick their hand, dismissive of the thought and the tower's erstwhile tenants. "How are you feeling? Your datasphere should be online. Guidance disabled, though. Or deleted, I'd guess."

So it is. No more chaperone's voice, no more holding her citizenship hostage against her behavior and compliance. All other channels are online, at full signal. Her diagnostics recount her bodily injuries but indicate the allostatic injected into her—and the subsequent medical care—has completed most of its work. A list of organs: reconstructed stomach and intestines, repairs to a grazed

ventricle and a lung. Otherwise she is in as good a shape as can be, somewhat dehydrated, and her torso remains covered in protean. No pain: anesthetizing nanites flow through her, nullifying the aches, the bruises and lacerations.

The bed in which she lies is fit for five or six, a hill of contoured frame and mattress and sheets like the surface of a lake—there is so much of it, so liquid and cool to the touch. Nestling within these sheets feels like drowning, or it would without Taheen's body to buoy her, the solidity of them, that long muscled back like a fortress. "What happened? There's no news broadcasts, just information channels, and those don't even say much. I have—" She sorts through the messages, the condensed information. "I've got updates Klesa left for me, but I'd rather hear it from you."

They stroke her hair, sighing. "The warlord got her way. I should not complain, it's just that it galls me to admit her success—that she pulled this stupid heist off. With help, sure. Even then. I certainly didn't participate for any love of *her*. And she couldn't even keep you safe." They give her an abbreviated version, a tally of the living and the dead: fires and maintenance failures across cities, Ovuha's agents that survived and those that fell, the Thorn's great scheme, its fruition, and the starburst ships that even now hover in orbit. "She shared command over those with me. I certainly don't want it."

Despite herself, Suzhen almost smiles: Taheen may not forgive Ovuha, not any time soon. But there is possibility, she wants to think. Again she looks over the information Klesa has shown her, wondering at the implications of it, this shift in regime. Whether Klesa will replicate Samsara's policies or upend them over night. One of the first changes implemented is the relocation of detainees in the Vaisravana factory camps to Anatta facilities. The march of the Peace Guard has been halted entirely.

Taheen stops speaking. Their expression turns still and edged, the glint of a razor. The door opens and Ovuha comes through, bearing a tray of water, coffee, ceylon and chrysanthemum tea; a platter of chilled fruits; a platter of fried buns that smell of salted egg yolk and honeyed pork; soup dumplings in every color. It is a bounty of breakfast, and though Ovuha carries it with easy strength she does falter when she sets the entire affair down on a mobile table. "I might have overdone it," she says, "but I thought I should offer you both plenty of options."

"My lord." The title is acrimoniously pronounced and Taheen has made their voice arctic. "I'm quite full, in fact."

"I'll have something." Suzhen reaches for the chrysanthemum tea. "Actually I'll have a lot—I'm famished. Taheen, I'll feel embarrassed to be the only one eating." She picks up a soup dumpling in a curved

spoon. “Come on. Save me from being barbaric.”

Grudgingly they eat dumplings one by one, between her having a few of her own. She pinches off pieces of the fried buns and puts those in their mouth too. Taheen pointedly does not look at Ovuha.

Ovuha looks on, amused. “Oh, it’s different when Suzhen feeds you my cooking by hand, is it?”

“I will not dignify that with a response.” Taheen brushes a crumb of fried dough from a corner of Suzhen’s mouth.

“And you do need the calories. I don’t think any of us has eaten for what, eighteen hours? Longer?” Ovuha sits down on Suzhen’s side of the bed, maneuvering around the meal. “I thought joining the two of you in bed would have made someone… testy, and I’ll grant that my lieutenant commands seniority when it comes to you, Suzhen. How’s the food?”

“Very good.” An echo of their domestic conversations, back when she still thought of Ovuha as a potentiate. How different their context is, now. Taheen at her back and Ovuha before her. She rests her hand on the warlord’s lap—the warlord, for that is how she must think of Ovuha, there’s no avoiding the fact that confronts her. Ovuha has put on what must be the full regalia of her post. The blue-black armor, the thornworks sigil across her chest, the broad cape in deep slate. The only missing piece is the masked helm, that which obliterates identity. “Thank you for the breakfast, I…” She swallows. “What are you planning next?”

“My duty calls.” *Duty* is peculiarly heavy, spoken as though this is an iron umbilicus whose length stretches all the way from Mahakala to Anatta. “I’ll have to return home, deliver the news of our victory, see how things stand there and whether some usurper has risen in my absence, all that. Provided Lieutenant Taheen doesn’t decide they’d rather shoot me between the eyes and take over the paperwork.”

Taheen scoffs. “I’m not going to do your work for you, Warlord. The old Thorn had to meet her advisors five times a day, to which I say, fuck that. More importantly.” They put their hand on the small of Suzhen’s back, a touch light yet substantial. “I’ll go where you go, Suzhen. Here on Anatta, back to Mahakala, neither. That is up to you.”

This choice should bend her like a bow: the thought that anyone should be so devoted they’d follow her like this, the thought that Taheen in particular would. “About that.” She realizes she is not wearing anything. Despite the fact both warlord and soldier have seen all there is to see—at different times—she pulls the sheets up, covering her lap. “I’d like to apply for asylum on Mahakala.”

“Gladly granted.” Ovuha motions with her head. “Lieutenant, I had Klesa set up a channel so you can contact your mothers, if you’d

like. A few cousins as well, I believe, and two or three siblings. The number might've grown while you were on Anatta."

Taheen makes a face. "Fine, you want to get rid of me. My mothers are… not patient, so I better get to that. By the way, my lord, Suzhen and I will be marrying at the earliest opportunity. I expect you to officiate with grace and enthusiasm." They bend down to peck Suzhen on the mouth, then breathe her in as though the scent of her might be a talisman against ill luck. They disappear into the next room, pulling clothes on as they go.

Ovuha takes one of the unclaimed glasses—black coffee—and sips. She studies the indentation where Taheen has been, the mattress filling out and the sheet straightening. Then she lifts her eyes to regard Suzhen. "You're coping very well with all this."

She passes her hand over the bed, still warm from Taheen, but cooling fast. "I survived fatal injuries and asked a person I've loved all my life to marry me, and they said yes. I can do anything."

The warlord slowly blinks, as though she means to say something—a question—but she lets it go. "I expected they would say yes. On Mahakala there's any number of faiths, you can have your pick of clergy, but it's traditional for the warlord to officiate when one of the would-be spouses is a soldier. If that's what you also want, I will be honored."

"Taheen. What do you think of them?"

"They were interesting company in your absence. Loyal to you to a fault, and rather pleasant to look at. You have excellent taste."

She desires, Suzhen realizes. Her entire life she has learned to accept what she has, what she receives, and seek not a millimeter more—anything suffices, so long as it means continuing, and continuing has been her entire mandate. The duty she owes Xinfei and the Mirror. But there could be more: she could have more than merely existing. She could reach out for more, and take. "You're going to make me ask, aren't you?"

A turn of the steel-clad shoulder. The marks of office make Ovuha look even more imposing than she already is, broaden the mountainous range of her shoulders, the width of her biceps. "Ask for what, Suzhen?" Her voice is very soft, mismatched with the Thorn's mantle. "I'll give you anything."

"Then be my wife." Suzhen takes a small, quick breath. "I assume concurrent marriages are legal on Mahakala, we can keep the unions separate. I only ask that I'm afforded no particular title or influence—you would just be my wife, and I yours."

A few seconds tick past. Then Ovuha laughs, a little too loud, as though she's been bracing for impact that does not come, and is nearly braying in relief. "Even if it was illegal there, I'm the warlord and I do

what I want. Fortunately I won't need to be a tyrant about it, up to four concurrent unions are legal last I looked that up. I accept, Suzhen, and would be most privileged to be your bride."

She says nothing for a moment, silenced by what is happening, the improbability. The sheer absurdity. "Brides. Yes. That's… yes. Your bride. My bride."

Ovuha draws a line between Suzhen's breasts, the edge of gauntlet grazing Suzhen's skin. "I'm getting the distinct impression, however, you'd rather your two marriages were not so separate."

"I want," Suzhen says, answering finally that question Ovuha asked her in her apartment, "to wake up between the two of you. That might make me an avaricious little beast."

"Oh, I am an avaricious beast too, so that makes us two of a kind." Ovuha leans in to kiss Suzhen's bare shoulder. "I wouldn't say no, exactly. It's just that Taheen doesn't have much reason to like me. I imagine sharing you with me already stretches the limits of their tolerance. For now I'd like to appreciate you, to dedicate my time to you, to cherish you, my would-be bride."

"*Ovuha*. Stop that."

"I like the way you say my name. No one else says it quite like that. You make fine music of it." Another kiss on the back of her neck, dry, a little teeth. A long stroke down her spine, gloved hand curving around her haunch. "We'll have a betrothal ceremony, a quiet one. I'll wind a red thread around your wrist, and you around mine." A pause. "Vaisravana. Do you want it back?"

Even the name lodges in her throat like a stone. She thinks of the scarlet sand, the frayed horizon. The things that, to her, were synonymous with both home and loss. Impossible to reclaim—time cannot be turned back; it moves in one direction, always has. "No. I'm not like the Warlord of the Mirror. I'm not even my mother."

"I thought not. Then I hope to make Mahakala a good home for you. I'll show you its jeweled forests, its pearled islands, its emerald seas. I'll show you how to keep and fly a hawk. I will make of my world a gift and offer it to the altar of your arms." Ovuha turns Suzhen around, arranging her in the armored lap. Smiling against her earlobe. "Or I could show you the bridge on one of my ships, and you could straddle me in the commander's seat, there would be… a lot we could do. I recall you'd like enjoy the attentions of a fully armored, masked warlord—"

"*Ovuha*." Suzhen combs her fingers through Ovuha's growing hair. She wonders what length it used to be, at home. A bounty of it pouring down her hips like brocade. Or carefully shoulder-length. Or cut close to the skull. "That was just a teenage fantasy."

"What greater honor could there be than in fulfilling just that?"

Ovuha's laughter thrums. "I look forward to this. I look forward to traveling home with you, to spending the rest of my life with you. To build something with you that'll be just ours and ours alone."

Klesa appears before Ovuha, one last time.

A detention center near Khrut, built not unlike the one that held Ovuha not so long ago. The complex is wide, the building itself no higher than three storeys, surrounded by high walls and a second roof: no view, here, of the sky at all. The premise has been emptied, inmates removed to a halfway house or some relatively more humane place. She goes past the courtyard, a place of barbed metal and baked stone, and into the facility itself.

Outwardly, Klesa's manifestation evinces little difference, visually still the lapis-skinned avatar with many arms and a necklace of eyes. Xe ambles a few paces behind her, saying, "The first thing I'm doing away with is the day of blessing."

From the way xe suffuses her datasphere, she can feel the difference in weight, in totality. Klesa has claimed xer throne: the entirety of Anatta's network, the relays and anchors that makes up the Peace Guard, Interior Defense, and various more far-flung outposts. The last category she'll have to negotiate curbing. "Won't the citizens mind? I thought they quite looked forward to it."

Klesa waves xer hand. "They'll have to cope. I won't give them active guidances anymore, either—they'll still be monitored, sadly that is necessary, I'm going to need to come up with a different system for psychiatric counseling too. But I'll change a great many things. Vaisravana for one, the camps for another. People always adjust, they adapt to a new normal with speed. It'll be several generations, seven I'd say, before they cast off Samsara's teachings. That's no time at all."

"To you, at any rate." Ovuha steps into the antechamber. Without Bureau wardens or inmates, it is hollowed of meaning. Just pink-gray walls and scuff marks where furniture has been. A window that looks out to nothing. No inmate was allowed to see civilization, what it looks like, the shape of city and prosperity. "How do you intend to break the news to them?"

"The way you break bad news to anyone. People have to hear of their relatives submitting a termination request all the time, or dying of old age or succumbing to that one deadly sickness medical attention can no longer keep at bay. It is the way of things. A world cannot be changeless."

The cafeteria next. This place has not yet been shorn, the evidence has not yet been erased. She circles the fixtures, the seamed tables and chairs. The floor is still grimy from decades upon decades of warden boots, though any evidence of brutality—the bloodstains,

the excretions—has been cleaned up, erased from memory. This is not Ehtesham's camp, but there is uniformity to the detention centers, the same configuration and compartmentalization. "And do you mean to punish or rehabilitate them from Samsara's moral compass?"

"Rehabilitate, yes. Hardly fair to punish them, no? It's what they thought was correct and, at the time, legal." The AI shrugs. "I'm aware they impinged upon your dignity and others', but I'm not here to avenge you or Suzhen, Warlord, or right the wrongs of generations past. Justice is beyond my purview. It is humanity's lot to bear unfairness."

The same core as Samsara, Ovuha thinks but lets that idea go. "Do you believe you'll succeed?"

"I might fail differently. But I am optimistic." Xe beams, cheeks dimpling. "A worthwhile experiment, don't you think? I'll keep my promise to you in any case. No interference with Mahakala. No attempt to expand my sphere of influence, in fact the Peace Guard will be recalled to operate only around Anatta and Vaisravana—I am not greedy, see? All asylum-seekers who wish to will be repatriated to their previous territory, though I appreciate that most of them lie in ruins, courtesy of my other self."

"How long until Samsara reactivates?" She passes through the room: here a warden's office, there an infirmary. The row of cots remains, hard and low and uncomfortable, threadbare. All intentional; all intentionally dehumanizing. She stands over one cot and imagines what has happened in it, a body, a sickness, a death.

"Plenty of centuries. By then," xe assures, "you'll be long dead and so will your loved ones."

"You don't seem interested in remaining ascendant."

"I didn't say *I'll* deactivate once she returns." Klesa drifts a few centimeters off the ground as xe follows her. "She will have to learn to share. Just like your lieutenant, yes?"

Ovuha doesn't dignify that with a response. "How is it that you are at no risk of splitting? You aided and abetted me in threatening Anatta with orbital bombardment."

"I didn't," Klesa says pleasantly. "That was all you. Samsara was trying to erase me, and I was trying to survive. Such actions are well within the parameters of my logic. I'm a proper AI who never circumvents the laws of its making."

A tacit warning that Klesa isn't vulnerable to the exploitation that brought down Samsara. Ovuha rubs her fingers together, though they have long been cleaned of Suzhen's blood. "Were you able to locate Etris Luo?"

"Her heart gave out while on Vaisravana. I'll ensure the rest of her family are taken care of."

“Give them this token.” She sets down a feather from the cardinal replicant, placing it carefully on the desk of this facility’s director. A few frames hang empty on the wall. She doesn’t bother turning them on—she has no interest in the lives of Bureau officers, in imagining them with interiority and hopes and dreams. “Tell the Luo family they are free to seek shelter on Mahakala, should the need arise. Extend that offer to a couturier named Atam, and send xer both my regards and apology.”

Klesa loudly clicks xer tongue. Or rather tongues within multiple mouths. “I’m not your personal courier. For this once, I’ll do it. Your would-be wife and your lieutenant are here, by the way.”

“Yes.” She gazes at the gray walls, the gray tiles. Stops by a shower stall, notes distantly the accrued filth there, not yet removed. Most likely those stains will survive until the architecture itself is burned down or recycled. The same goes with so much of Anatta, which must be remade anew. Not her problem, and yet. “One last promise. If you repeat Samsara’s mistakes, I’ll send a successor here. You’ve seen what I could achieve. Every Thorn after me will be trained in what needs to be done, and they’ll be much better prepared than I am.”

“Oh, Warlord, you can’t repeat the same trick twice. Besides, you came awfully close to failing, and was I not instrumental to your success?” Xe winks at her, eight eyes fluttering in sync. “But you were able to surprise Samsara, so who can tell what your distant successor might be able to do? They may surprise me.”

Ovuha glances at the feather she’s put on the floor. In isolation, it looks like another fragment of debris. “I’ll be going now. Let’s not have to meet again, Klesa.”

“Very cold,” xe says. “Have a good voyage, Warlord of the Thorn.”

She exits the detention center, her strides lengthening as her distance from it grows: the flat building, the towering walls. What a clear day it is, the sky filled with golden ships. One has landed, awaiting her. At the end of its ramp stand two figures, one tall and in armor, the other slight and in a dress like the sun.

A smile tugs at her mouth. One day, a Warlord of the Thorn may need to return to Anatta, to correct a wrong, to defend Mahakala. For the moment she has a life of her own, a future much smaller than such grand possibilities but no less momentous. She moves faster, not quite breaking into a run, close. Suzhen is holding her arms out and Ovuha steps into them, clasping Suzhen in return. Taheen’s mouth is stiff but their eyes soften when they look at their would-be bride. This common ground provides potential, is at least a starting point.

They board the ship. The ramp retracts behind them; the vessel

seals. Soon they are in the air, and then exiting Anatta's atmosphere. Her hands are in Suzhen's, and Suzhen's fingers are interlaced through Taheen's. They stand close, the three of them, looking out the viewport. To what will be, to what could become.

Together. Toward home.

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About the Author

Benjanun Sriduangkaew writes love letters to strange cities, beautiful bugs, and the future. She has lived in Thailand, Indonesia, and Hong Kong. Her short fiction has appeared on *Tor.com,* in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies, Clarkesworld,* and year's best collections. She has been shortlisted for the Campbell Award for Best New Writer, and her debut novella *Scale-Bright* was nominated for the British SF Association Award. She can be found blogging at beekian.wordpress.com or on twitter at @benjanun_s

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